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Collector's Edition

Medieval life

The stories of ordinary people
in the Middle Ages



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BBC **HiSTORY**
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The medieval era is often viewed through the eyes of the elites: the **kings, queens, knights and church leaders** who dominated Europe at the time. But what would life have been like for the ordinary people who made up the vast majority of the population during this period?

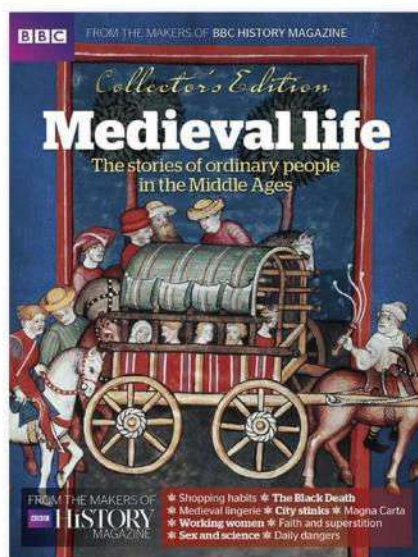
In this special edition of *BBC History Magazine*, a host of expert historians seek to answer that question. **Find out how people in the Middle Ages felt about the world around them** – from religion and the social order to sex, disease and death.

You will also discover what it was like to **work, shop, travel and dress as a medieval person** would have done. Plus, brace yourself for our rundown of the greatest dangers of the Middle Ages and the worst smells to afflict a medieval nose. As befits the year of the **Magna Carta 800th anniversary**, we have also included a piece that analyses what the great charter meant for society at large.

We have put together this special edition by compiling some of the **finest articles on medieval society** to have appeared in *BBC History Magazine* over the years. I hope that you find it a stimulating read and that it will encourage you to try our monthly magazine – if you haven't already – where we will continue to explore the medieval world on a regular basis.

Rob Attar

Editor



“You can’t study medieval society without **realising pretty quickly** that there is something profoundly *different* about it”

Historian **GUY HALSALL** shares his thoughts on medieval life on page 114

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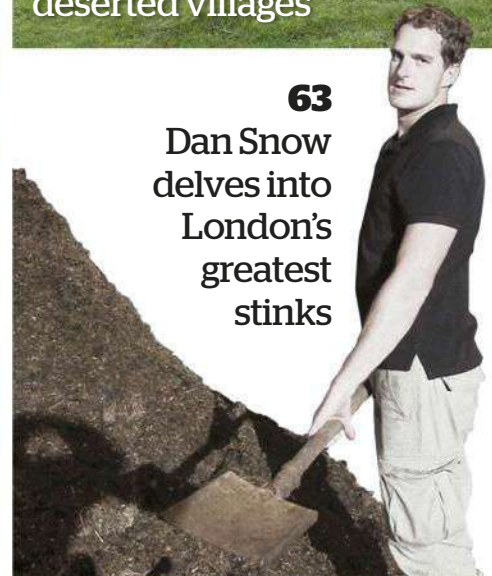


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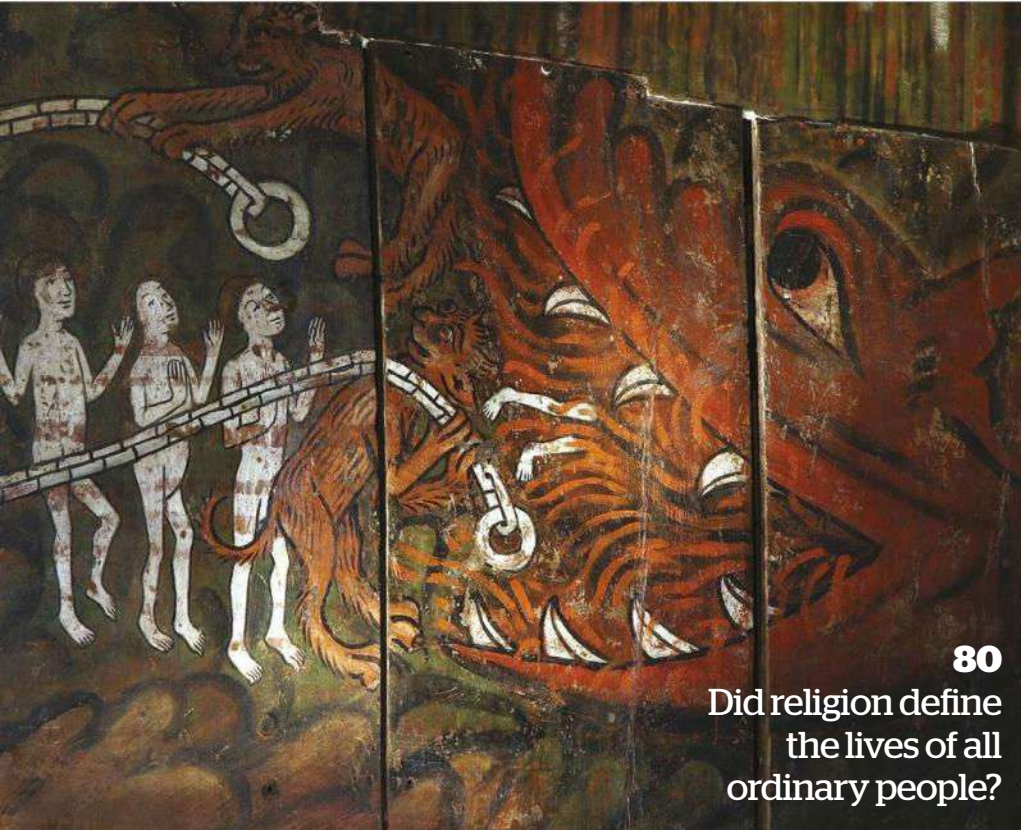
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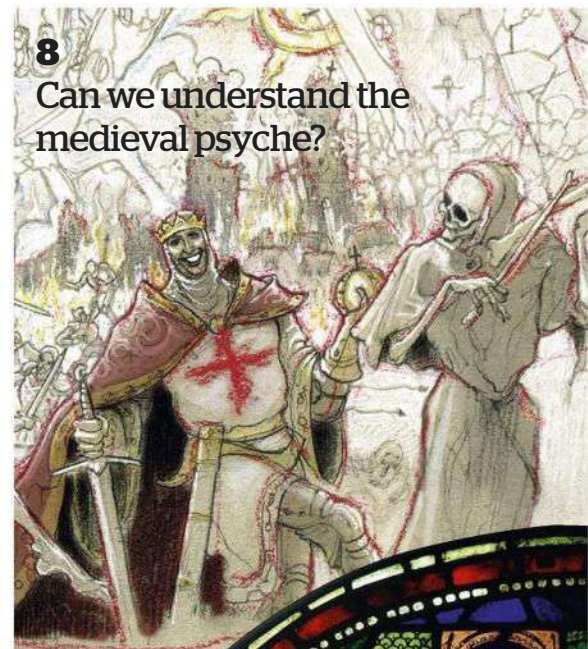
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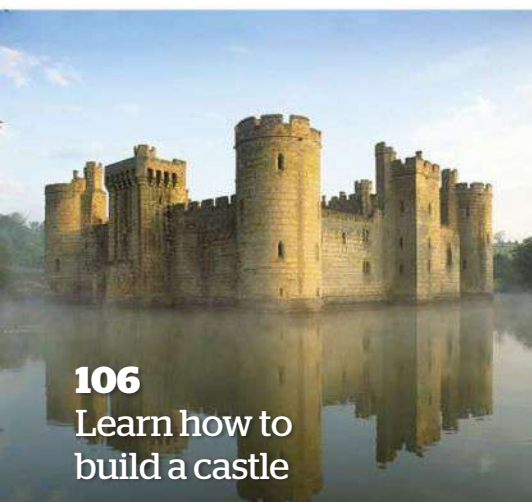
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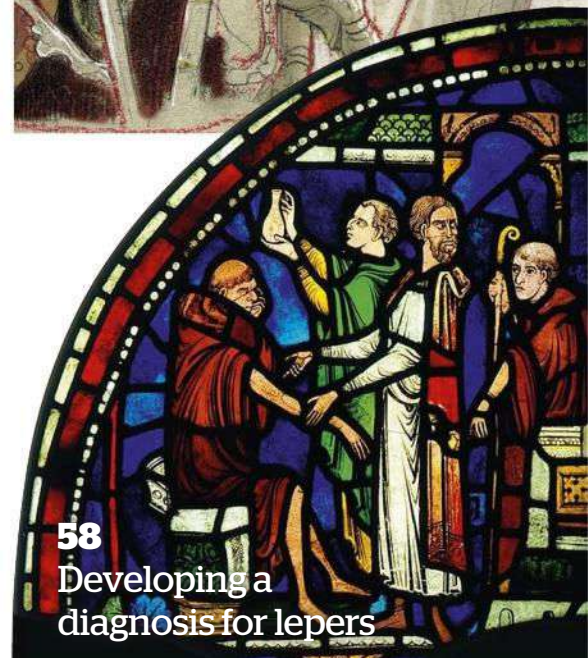


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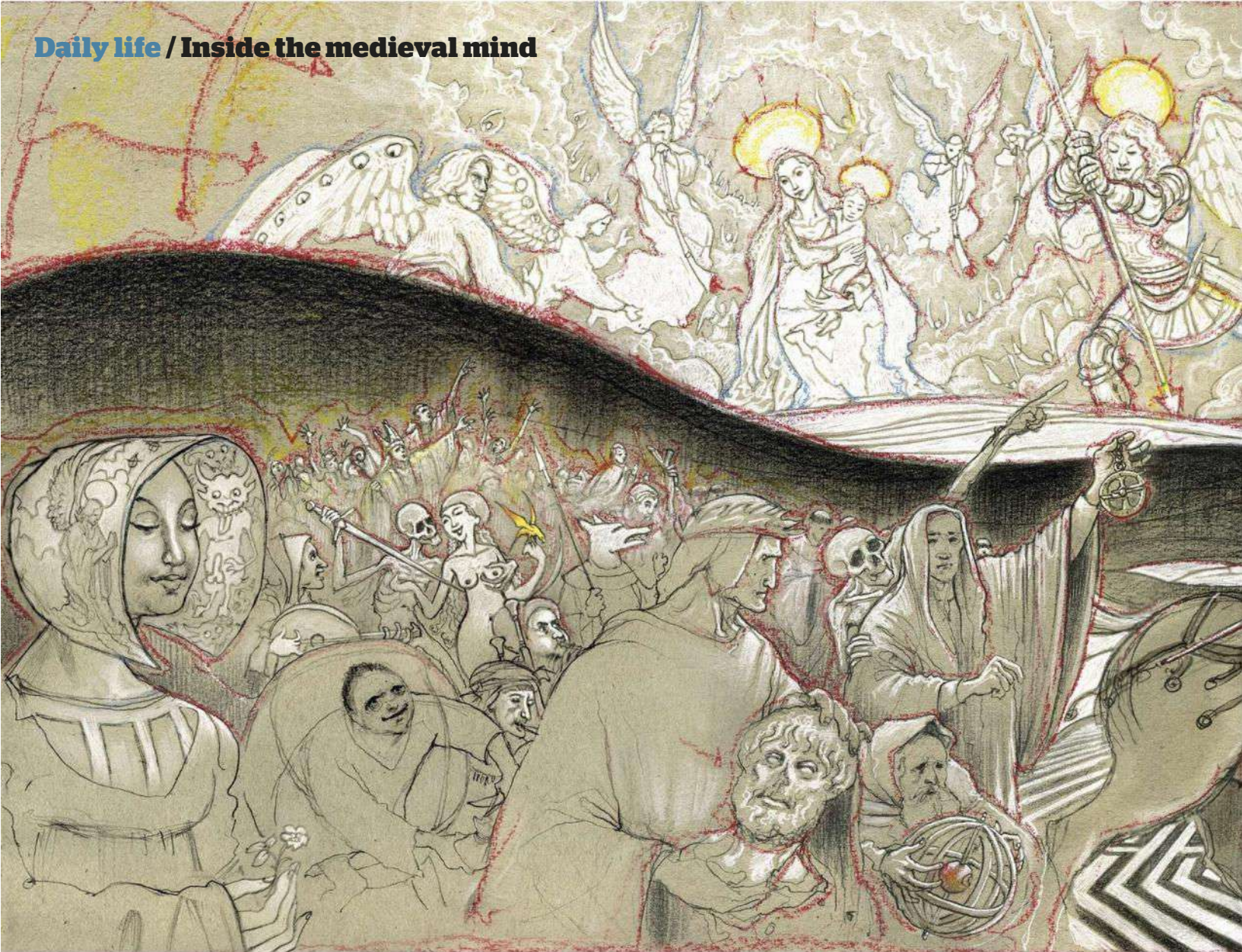
For all their superstitions, our medieval ancestors helped shape today's world, says Guy Halsall





What could you buy for a groat? Discover how people of all classes shopped, hunted, dressed, thought and communicated in the medieval era

LIFE



Inside the me

Superstitious and religious, prudish and passionate – **Julian Birkett** considers the ways in which people in the medieval world thought differently from us

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID VON BASSEWITZ

The lives they led were certainly very different from ours – but did medieval people think any differently from the way we do now? According to Professor Robert Bartlett, a specialist in the cult of saints and medieval England before the 14th century, the answer isn't cut and dried. "In many ways these were people very much like us in terms of family, ambitions for children and the world of emotions. On the other hand, they inhabited a very different world, in which it was believed the dead visited the living, and where somewhere there lived a race of people with the heads of dogs."



dieval mind

So how did our medieval forebears understand their world? According to the 12th-century philosopher Alan of Lille: "Every creature in the world is a book or a picture or a mirror for us." The author of the book was God, and the purpose of life was to understand the meaning of the book so that we might lead more spiritual and more moral lives.

Since the Renaissance we have looked at the world rather differently. We want to understand it so that we can control it and make it work to our advantage. The medieval world was not to be mastered so much as contemplated.

After all, it might end at any moment. Fear of imminent Armageddon ran like a dark thread through medieval consciousness. And everyone knew how it would end because numerous medieval texts, such as the 13th-century *Fifteen Signs before Doomsday*, told them: "On the first day the sea will rise up above the mountains... on the fourth day all the sea creatures will gather on the surface and make sounds and groans, whose meaning only God knows..."

And so on, until the 15th day – the Day of Judgment. With the next world trespassing on this one, it is small wonder that the medieval mind operated so differently from our own.

"The medieval world was not to be mastered so much as contemplated"



The door between this life and the next swung both ways in the medieval mind. No wonder people were all too aware of what might lie on the other side, being confronted by paintings such as this one of the Last Trump (c1500–20), in St Peter's Church, Wenhaston, Suffolk

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The natural and supernatural collide in this 1350 illustration of the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead

Did **Christianity** rule their lives?

Reminders of death – and what was feared to come after – were ever-present in life and art

Go to any medieval parish church and you will find tombs: in the chantry chapels built by the rich, and in the graveyard outside. We take this for granted. But you won't find the same in mosques, synagogues, or Buddhist or Hindu temples. Medieval Christianity made a cult of the dead, and brought them into the heart of religious experience.

The medieval dead were an insistent presence – so much so that they star in one of the most common folk tales of the era. The story of the Three Living and the Three Dead tells the tale of young swells out walking in the forest, where they meet three dead men. Lovingly portrayed in wall paintings as skeletons or rotting corpses, the dead men chide their living counterparts for their complacency: "Such as you are so were we / Such as we are so will you be."

Judging from medieval records, you might have thought twice about venturing out: corpses roamed the woods from Herefordshire to Buckinghamshire, and had to be reburied with their hearts burned to ashes. In fact, there were so many cadavers walking the land that the 12th-century chronicler William of

Newburgh could barely keep track: "One would not easily believe that corpses come out of their graves were there not so many cases supported by such ample testimony."

Medieval death marked merely the transition from this world to the next. This life was but the blink of an eye. Hence the fascination with the dead, who had made the journey that awaits us all: to live with God in heaven, perhaps after a painful stretch in the waiting rooms of purgatory, or to suffer eternal torment in hell.

Yet the traffic between this world and the next didn't travel in just one direction. Among the most intriguing genres in medieval writing is the account of the visit to the next world. Dante's may be the best

known, but he was joined by Essex peasant Thurkell, who came out of a coma with an acute grasp of the geography of the afterlife; elsewhere, the Irishman Fursey returned from the flames of hell with a singed beard.

The boundaries between the natural and the supernatural were fluid, and constantly crossed by armies of spiritual beings – nine orders of angels on one side, Satan and his cohorts on the other – all locked in a deadly struggle for the souls of the living.

Who was to protect medieval man from this onslaught? Fortunately, the church was on hand with a formidable array of sacraments to protect the individual – from the exorcism that is baptism to the last rites protecting the dying as they slip into the next world. Monasteries, built in the wilderness reminiscent of where Christ wrestled with Satan, also fought on behalf of the living. As Orderic Vitalis, a monk writing around 1100, put it: "A monastery is a castle built against Satan, where the cowed champions engage in ceaseless combat against Satan."

"Corpses roamed the woods and had to be buried with their hearts burned"

Was **sex** on their minds?

Contradictory ideas promoting both sexual purity and romantic love could be confusing

Cultural attitudes to sex are never uniform in any society. But in the medieval world the polarities are striking: on the one hand, a down to earth acceptance you might expect in a peasant society; on the other, an obsessive abhorrence of desire grounded in religious fervour. Take, for example, some of the questions the 11th-century church recommended that priests should ask their parishioners: "Have you committed fornication with your step-mother, your sister-in-law, your son's fiancée, your mother? Have you made a device in the shape of a penis and tied it...?" (and so on). Fierce disapproval and earthy plain-speaking coexist in this litany of charges.

Medieval misogyny is not surprising in itself. It had theological antecedents: Eve was the cause of original sin for tempting Adam in the Garden of Eden. But the virulence of it can take you aback. This is an early church story much studied in medieval times: "The curse God pronounced on your sex weighs still upon the

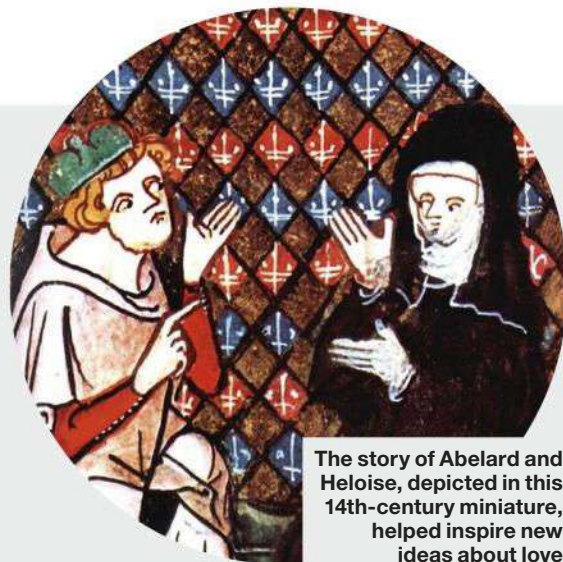
"The medieval world gave birth to the ideal of romantic love"

world. You are guilty – you must bear its hardships. You are the Devil's gateway."

And yet it was the medieval world that gave birth to the concept of romantic love. For reasons no one quite understands, 12th-century troubadours began to sing songs of love to women in which they were suddenly goddesses to be adored.

For the upper classes, at least, the rules of love were reinvented in lengthy treatises, and famous lovers celebrated in poems: Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Iseult, Abelard and Heloise.

That last pair, of course, was not fictional but real – Abelard the great scholar, Heloise the niece of a canon at the cathedral of Notre



The story of Abelard and Heloise, depicted in this 14th-century miniature, helped inspire new ideas about love

Dame. Their love letters from the 12th century are astonishing in their frankness, passion and willingness to break conventions. Heloise initially turned down Abelard's offer of marriage when she became pregnant, proclaiming that "the name of wife may seem more sacred – but sweeter to me will always be the word lover, concubine or whore".

In contrast, the church promoted the cult of virginity. According to the 12th-century writer Geoffrey of Burton, it was "the highest virtue, the mirror of purity, the nourishment of enduring love". But the young women who entered medieval nunneries might find themselves emotionally in a place not so very far from sexual passion – as suggested by the words of medieval mystic Angela of Foligno: "As I stood by the Cross I was filled with such fire I took off my clothes and offered him all of myself."

What did they think about marriage?

The medieval church actively involved itself in the goings on of the marital bed. Failure to consummate a marriage was grounds for annulment. Records from the Bishop's Court of York in 1433 described how a wife might go about bringing such a claim:

"The... witness exposed her bared breasts and with her hands, warmed at the fire, she held and rubbed John's penis and the testicles, embracing and frequently kissing him. And she stirred him up to demonstrate his virility and potency then and there.

"She says that the whole time the said penis was scarcely three inches long... remaining without any increase."



A c1300 illustration showing those two famous lovers Lancelot and Guinevere in bed



Blacksmiths at work. As labourers, they were well and truly rooted in the third estate

What did they think about **power** and **inequality**?

The prevailing social order was not to be questioned – until the Black Death disrupted the balance of the system

Today, most people believe that social equality is at least worth striving for. People in the Middle Ages thought quite differently. Profound inequality was part of the natural order – and therefore not to be tampered with. The class you were born into determined who you were.

There were three classes – or, as they were called, estates: those who pray (the priests and monks and clergy), those who fight (the aristocratic warrior class of knights) and those who work (everybody else – for example, serfs on a knight's estate). Each class had its own price, known as 'wergild' – literally, 'man-price'. If you killed a lord, you paid his family 1,200 shillings. If you killed a peasant, you paid 200. So a lord's life was worth six times as much as a peasant's.

Medieval lords were not so much landlords as warriors. Their land was given to them by the king because they supported him in military campaigns. Fighting was in their blue blood. "I love," says one in the 12th-century *Song of Roland*, "to see the gay Eastertide which brings forth leaves and flowers... but I also love to see knights and horses in battle array... and many vassals struck down and the horses of the dead and wounded roving at random."

These knights followed the international

codes of chivalry – a word today synonymous with gallantry and noble behaviour. Knights could behave nobly, but it was generally only towards their own class. When the Black Prince sacked the French town of Limoges in 1370 he ordered thousands of ordinary men, women and children to be slaughtered. The French knights, however, were taken as high-class prisoners and treated with respect.

In such violent times it's sometimes hard to understand how medieval society didn't disintegrate into feuding. To hold it all together would need divine help. And that is just what medieval kings had – at the ceremony of the coronation the new monarch was anointed with holy oil, just as a new priest would be, signifying his divinely sanctioned right to rule.

"Great inequality was part of the natural order – and not to be tampered with"

Did they worry about what they wore?

After the labour revolution that followed the Black Death, strenuous attempts were made by those in power to ossify the old order by legislating what people of different classes might or might not wear. The Sumptuary Laws of 1363 were directed against "the outrageous and excessive apparel of many people, contrary to their estate and their degree".

In other words, a peasant had to look like a peasant. But by that time it was too late. The bonds of feudalism had been loosened.

It was a different sort of divine intervention that did for the feudal system. The Black Death created such a huge shortage of labour that serfs could demand wages and move where they pleased.

The despised third estate – those who work – began to taste a new freedom.



The Black Prince, who slaughtered French peasants while sparing knights



Did they believe in **science** or **magic**?

The laws of nature and superstitious or religious beliefs were by no means incompatible

In the early Middle Ages the world was an enchanted place, suffused with the supernatural and understood to be guided by a Divine Plan. By the time Columbus discovered America, though, it had become a place to be mastered, even exploited.

In medieval books about animals, called bestiaries, the creatures of the world are carefully described and beautifully depicted. But these are not field guides; rather, they are philosophical analyses of the purpose of each animal in the Creation, with moral messages for the reader.

The beaver, we are told, secretes valuable musk in its testicles. When chased, it supposedly bites them off and displays the wound to let the pursuing huntsman know that his chase is pointless. Likewise, men

“An eclipse could still be interpreted as a sign of divine intervention”

must rid themselves of sin and display this to the Devil in order to escape capture by him. Each animal has a spiritual lesson to teach us.

Medieval minds were capable of believing things which today seem paradoxical: for example, an event could be both natural and supernatural. It was known that an eclipse was caused by one heavenly body passing in front of another, in accordance with the laws of science. Yet it was still possible to interpret an eclipse as a sign of divine intervention. In the *Chronicle of the Crusade* (c1220), Oliver of Paderborn writes: “Soon after we arrived



Did they really believe in men with dogs' heads?

Medieval thinkers were much exercised by the existence of dogheads – creatures with the bodies of men but the heads of dogs, who were believed to live in communities somewhere on the margins of the world, keeping farm animals. The painting shown above, probably dating from the early 15th century, depicts the wolf-headed inhabitants of the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean as reputedly described by early travellers. Such accounts raised an important question: were these creatures essentially human – in which case, should one try to convert them? The ninth-century scholar Ratramnus was in no doubt: “A group of moral, rational beings living in a society bound by laws? This is humanity, not mere animality.”

AKG IMAGES



Why did they keep relics?

Relics (literally, what is left behind) of medieval saints were believed to have supernatural powers, and churches competed to acquire them. A list of the relics in Canterbury Cathedral in the year 1316 includes: 12 whole bodies of saints, three heads, 12 arms, pieces of Jesus's cross, foreskin, cradle and tomb, and innumerable bits of blood, hair and bone. Most were kept in reliquaries like this 14th-century enamelled casket, believed to contain relics of St George.



This late 13th-century illumination shows a beaver biting off its own testicles to deter a hunter – an allegory exhorting men to cast off sin to escape capture by the Devil

there was an almost total eclipse of the moon. This often happens from natural causes at the time of the full moon. Nevertheless, since the Lord says ‘there shall be signs in the sun and moon’, we interpreted this eclipse as unfavourable to the enemy.”

The Mappa Mundi (map of the world) in Hereford Cathedral exhibits just such a mix of empirical knowledge and speculation. The three known continents of Europe, Asia and Africa are depicted, and many towns, rivers and seas are accurately marked. On the periphery, however, lurk the fantastical creatures firmly believed to exist in far-flung regions: dogheads, monopods and unicorns.

When Columbus sailed off to find a new route to the east he enjoyed the benefits of all of the new technology available at the time – better sailing ships, gunpowder,

compasses. But he, too, expected to find the fabulous creatures of the Mappa Mundi – those classic inventions of the medieval mind. **II**

Julian Birkett was the series producer of the 2008 BBC Four series *Inside the Medieval Mind*, presented by the leading medieval historian Professor Robert Bartlett

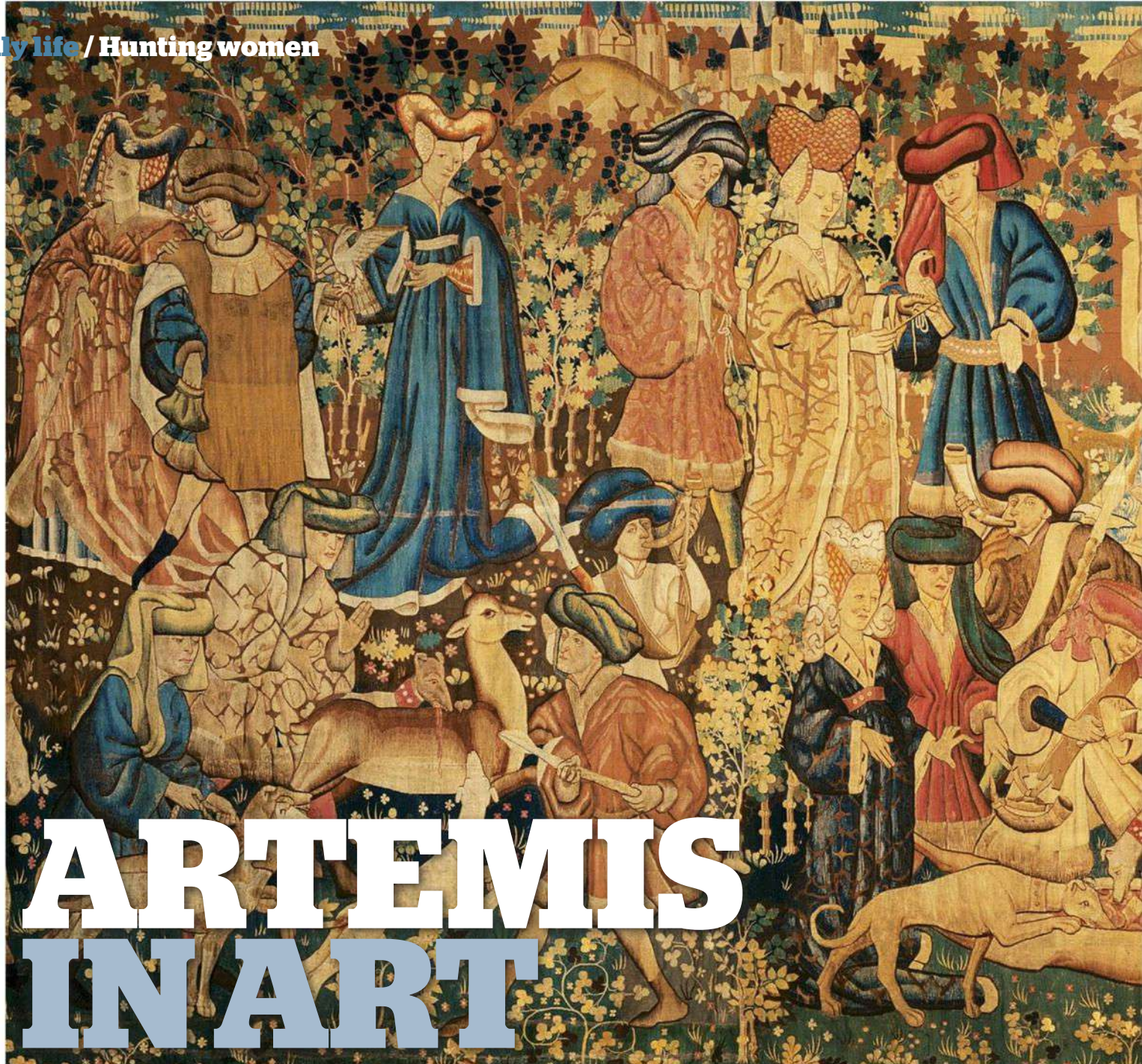
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BOOKS

► **The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages** by Robert Bartlett (CUP, 2008)

► **England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings 1075–1225** by Robert Bartlett (OUP, 2002)

► **Inventing the Middle Ages** by Norman F Cantor (Lutterworth Press, 1992)



ARTEMIS IN ART

Portrayals in art and embroidery show that hunting was far from a solely male preserve in the medieval and Renaissance periods.

Richard Almond looks at images that illustrate the various roles played by women

Hunting for sport, food and raw materials was a universal occupation in the European Middle Ages and Renaissance. However, medieval hunting manuals and treatises, as well as contemporary narratives and romances – the vast majority of which were written by men – present hunting as the exclusive leisure prerogative of noble, educated males. These sources ignore women's roles in, and presence at, the hunt – and also disregard any significant involvement of the commons (those who were not clergy, nobility or knights).

Even the most high-ranking women lacked a literary voice so, initially at least, the case for proposing that women hunted appears

difficult to pursue. However, despite the paucity of textual evidence, it is self-evident that women at all social levels must have contributed to a basic activity which supported economically both the rural and urban communities.

Indeed, evidence drawn from art historical sources – particularly illuminated manuscripts, tapestries, paintings, carvings, engravings and prints – shows that women from all ranks of society were engaged in hunting in all its forms: aristocratic ladies pursued deer on horseback with hounds, and shot driven game, while peasant women netted birds, ferreted rabbits, and poached and distributed venison.

Women are often depicted in images alongside men, usually as their companions,



One of four mid-15th-century tapestries known as the *Devonshire Hunts* shows members of the aristocracy “indulging in enjoyable love-play”, while hunt servants feed the hounds

1 Ladies as audience

Many contemporary images present women in a purely passive role, apparently as part of a decorative audience, admiring and applauding the exploits of husbands, lovers and male relatives.

There appears to be little doubt that female approval, applause and even adoration were important to the aristocratic medieval hunter and sportsman, as they were to the tourneying and questing knight, as indicated by romantic narratives and poems such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The four hunting tapestries in the Victoria and Albert Museum known as the *Devonshire Hunts* illustrate this point clearly. Probably made to celebrate an aristocratic marriage in the mid-15th century, the tapestries contain many vignette scenes of aristocratic ladies watching and admiring the various hunting activities of their husbands and lovers. Unsurprisingly, sex emerges at the ceremonial climax of the hunt. While watching the breaking up of the hind and the *curée*, or feeding of the hounds by the hunt servants, several noble hunters and their ladies are caught indulging in enjoyable love-play.

assistants or, significantly, as learners, but they are also shown hunting and hawking, alone or with female companions. Though it has been argued by more traditional historians that many of these images are satirical, representing the ‘world upside-down’ notion so beloved of contemporary male commentators, a significant number undoubtedly portray what women were *actually* doing in the countryside.

Given the overwhelming corpus of illustrative evidence, it is fallacious to accept images of ladies hawking as ‘reality’, while dismissing all, or most, of those of women hunting as ‘unreality’. A miniature from the *Romance of Alexander* in the Bodleian Library (overleaf, top) clarifies this issue. On the left, two ladies are hart hunting on foot: one holds

two leashed hounds and blows a hunting horn while the second thrusts a cross-hilted hunting spear into a hart held by her hound. On the right, two ladies are hawking. One falconer recalls her hawk by swinging a lure, and her companion holds a long staff; meanwhile, two hawks swoop down on a wild duck sitting in a pond. It’s probable that both these pictures are telling the audience what noblewomen did – rather than did not – do.

By interpreting images, used alongside textual sources, we are able to clarify our understanding of the culture of hunting and food collection – by both men and women – in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. We now know that women had significant roles to play, and that these were dictated by their gender and social status.



2 The courtly huntress

The general impression gained from late medieval and Renaissance art sources, as well as some romantic literature, is that high-ranking women were often to be seen in the hunting field. Most recent historians agree that hunting and hawking were high-status social activities expected of aristocratic women. Hunting with hounds was, and continued to be, a typical courtly activity that involved the active participation of women, if they so desired.

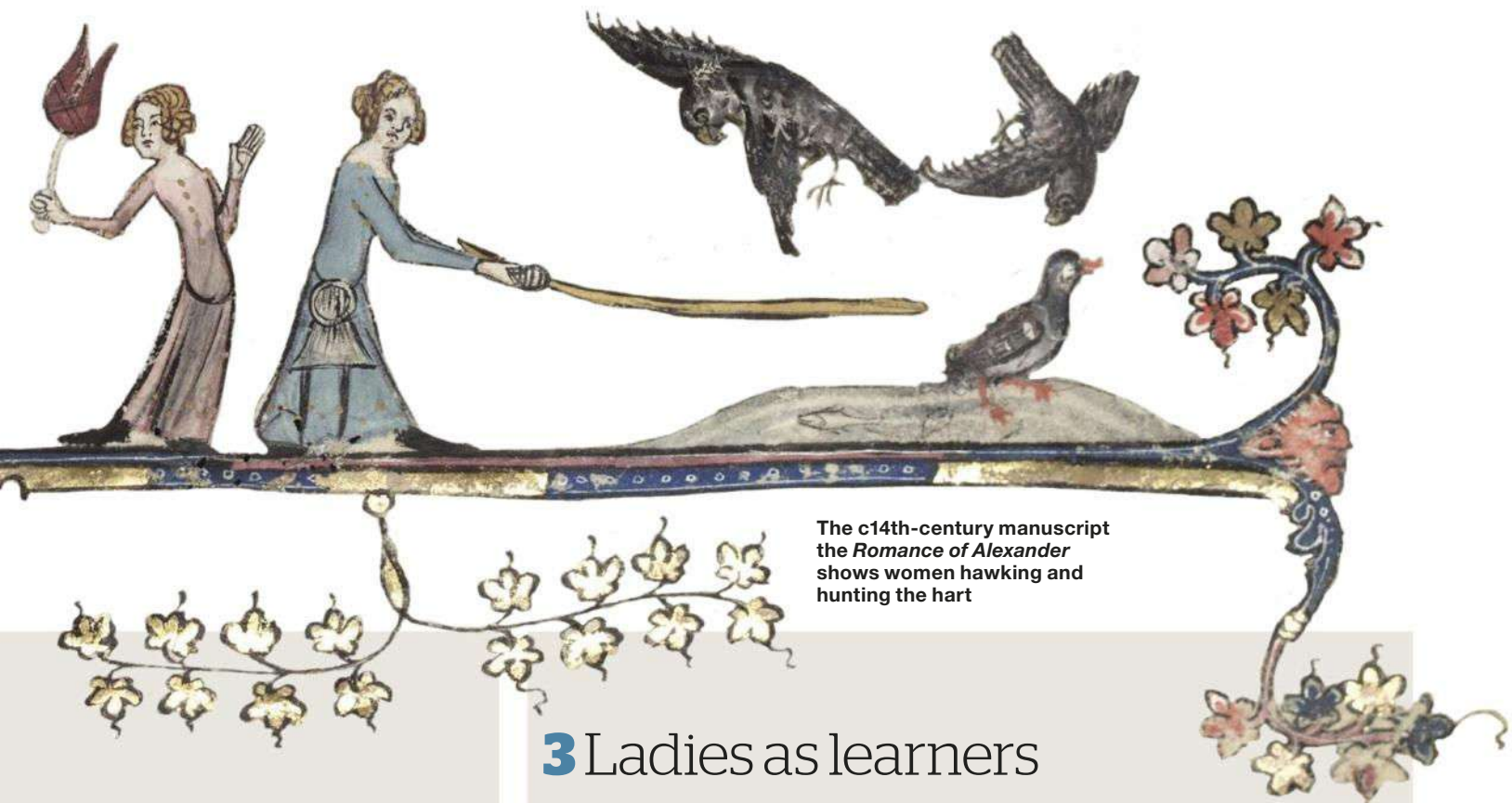
Notable examples of royal and aristocratic huntresses include Queen Isabella, wife of Edward II; Mary of Burgundy, the young wife of Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, who died as a result of a hunting accident; and both Queen Mary I and her sister, Elizabeth I. Both of Henry VIII's daughters were applauded by their male peers as "lernered" in hunting knowledge and as skilled, courageous huntresses of deer.

Many of Elizabeth's contemporary admirers, including Sir Walter Raleigh, regarded her as a *chasseresse* – the living embodiment of Artemis or Diana, goddess of hunting. This was a recurrent notion: the beautiful Diane de Poitiers, mistress of the French king Henry II, had herself portrayed in marble (right) as *The Diana of Anet* (1550–54), reclining on a hart with her favourite hounds, and as Diana the huntress in several portraits. Marie de Rohan-Montbazon (1600–79), Duchess of Chevreuse, another keen huntress, was famously portrayed in oils as Diana.

Yet not all men were impressed by the image of the brave, sophisticated huntress. Torquato Tasso argued in his *Discourse about Feminine Virtue* (1582) that some royal women were really men by birth and that they should be judged as such. In doing so, he reflected not only contemporary chauvinism but also perhaps an unease about women's skills in activities such as hunting that were traditional male preserves.



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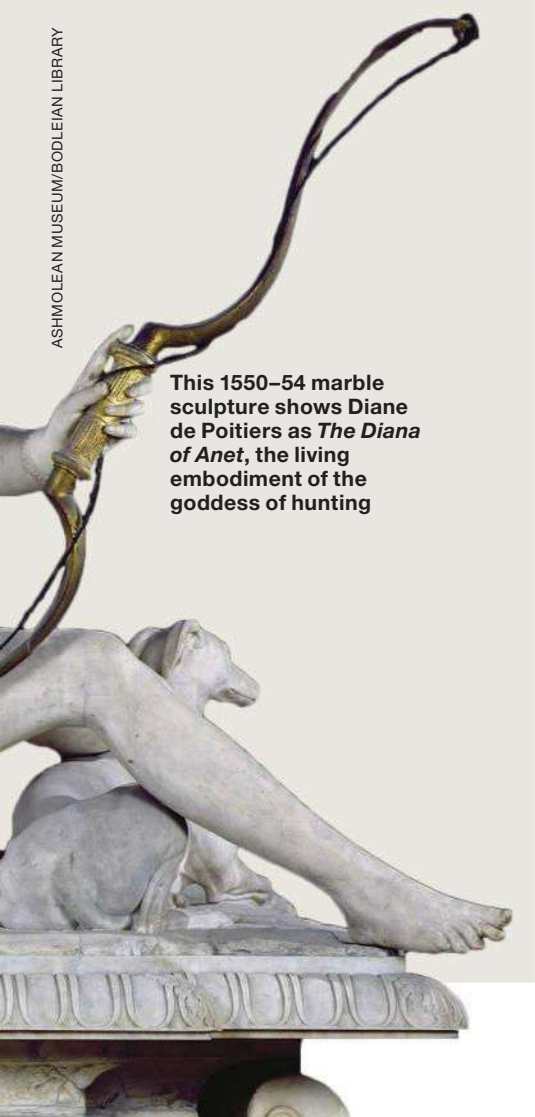
The c14th-century manuscript the *Romance of Alexander* shows women hawking and hunting the hart

3 Ladies as learners

One of the interests and specialities of the Florentine painter, draughtsman and printmaker Antonio Tempesta (1555–1630) was the portrayal of hunting methodology. Much of his work has a didactic theme, clearly indicating that some courtly women were taught the arts and skills of hawking and hunting by older men, and in a significantly different manner from aristocratic males, who were traditionally

instructed from an early age as part of their formal education.

In *Hunters with Crossbows Shooting at Birds* (below), the hunters, accompanied by their hounds to pick up the fallen quarry, shoot at birds in the treetops. A courtier, his left arm around her shoulder and right hand pointing at the quarry, instructs and guides his lady, who is holding a loaded crossbow and peering upwards.



This 1550–54 marble sculpture shows Diane de Poitiers as *The Diana of Anet*, the living embodiment of the goddess of hunting



A woman is taught how to shoot birds in this c1598 artwork by Antonio Tempesta



4 Peasant women as assistants

The main female contribution to most peasant hunting activities appears to have been providing able assistance rather than actually killing quarry. A 15th-century Burgundian tapestry of peasants ferreting rabbits shows that it was the men who netted the animals from a warren and then dispatched them.

The Hare Hunt (above), an engraving by the Dutch artist David Vinckboons (1576–1633), illustrates the close relationship between men and women of both classes. The courtly hunters are depicted superbly mounted and elaborately dressed for the occasion, whereas the servants – a man and a woman – are plainly dressed for their

An early 17th-century engraving shows courtly hunters (left), and (right) peasants – a man and a woman – paunching hares

messy job of paunching hares. The peasants' task of slitting open the hares' bellies and taking out the guts is portrayed with detailed accuracy. This is an unusual illustration in that it shows a man and a woman from the commons using the same skills to perform a specialised task in the hunting field.



5 Peasant women poaching and hunting

Thirteenth-century forest court records show that some peasant women were involved in poaching venison. The few cases appear to have been the result of opportunism, such as when, at night, deer moved from the cover of the forest into the fields, orchards and even gardens of peasant communities in search of food. The crop damage caused by deer was much resented by the peasantry – yet deer were protected by Forest Law wherever they roamed. The obvious solution – with the added attraction of fresh venison – was to take such trespassing beasts covertly.

Records indicate that peasant women assisted their menfolk in killing isolated deer and picking up dead and wounded beasts from the courtly hunt, rather than doing the killing themselves. This is not to say they didn't take the lives of less dangerous quarry. Peasant women were, after all, used to wringing the necks of chickens, ducks and geese, as well as trapping and netting wild

birds for extra protein and feathers.

Images of peasant women engaged in hunting are unusual. The ruling classes rarely commissioned artists to record the activities of peasants, so their appearance in artworks is almost always peripheral to the main courtly subject. However, though the Bodleian version of the *Romance of Alexander* manuscript is overwhelmingly aristocratic in theme, an unusual marginal illumination (above) shows a young woman engaged in two methods of hunting traditionally carried out by the peasantry.

On the left, a girl calls to two songbirds flying above. She holds cords which are tied to a tree-stump upon which rests a decoy fox, probably a dead or stuffed animal. Clamouring birds are descending to mob the predator. A medieval audience would have undoubtedly realised that the cords are covered in bird-lime, a sticky substance made by bird-hunters from lime sap to ensnare birds.

This method, used to the present day, was widely employed to catch songbirds, not only for food but – perhaps more importantly for personal and local economies – also for sale in urban markets, particularly London. By the woman's side is a basket with its door open, ready to receive the birds once caught and removed from the bird-limed cords. On the right, two songbirds fly near a tree; a youth approaches, carrying a large partitioned bird cage and, over his shoulder, a smaller cage on a stick to house and transport the birds.

A married woman had immunity under Forest Law at the eyre courts (medieval courts that travelled from county to county), because she was considered to be under her husband's control, so could not be held guilty of any offence she committed. Using this legal immunity – known as *femme covert* – was convenient for unlawful husband-and-wife business partnerships in which the man poached venison and other game and his wife received it, selling it on the black market. Thanks to *femme covert*, historians can only guess at the extent to which peasant women were actively involved in poaching and the receiving and distribution of venison and other game meat. **H**

Richard Almond is an independent scholar. His research interests are centred upon hunting in the Middle Ages and Renaissance

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

- **Daughters of Artemis: The Huntress in the Middle Ages and Renaissance** by Richard Almond (DS Brewer, 2009)
- **Medieval Hunting** by Richard Almond (The History Press, 2011)



Revealing underwear

A discovery in Austria suggests our ancestors' dressing habits weren't so different from our own.

Beatrix Nutz looks at underwear, hygiene and social acceptance in the 15th and 16th centuries



The clothing of some of our ancestors might have had much in common with modern dress, as suggested by this illustration of Semiramis, legendary queen of the Assyrians, and two of her ladies-in-waiting, all wearing underpants. The coloured woodcut is from a German translation at the Bavarian State Library of Boccaccio's *Famous Women*, 1474

A woman hits her husband and puts on his underpants while he winds yarn in a late 15th-century engraving by Israhel van Meckenem. Pants were a symbol of male power at that time



Men wore shirts and braies (medieval underpants resembling modern-day shorts). Women sported a smock or chemise – but no pants. Until recently, that’s all we knew about medieval underwear. But archaeological finds made in 2008 in East Tyrol, Austria provide a better idea of what some women wore underneath their dresses.

Lengberg Castle, first documented in 1190, was rebuilt into a representative palais in the 15th century by the addition of a second floor. During extensive reconstruction in July 2008, a vault filled with waste was found beneath the floorboards of a room on the second

storey of the castle, where it was dumped during the 15th-century reconstruction. Because of dry conditions in the vault the organic waste, mainly consisting of worked wood, leather (shoes) and textiles, had been extremely well preserved

Significantly, four of the linen fragments resemble modern bras, and feature cut cups – in contrast to antique Greek or Roman breast bands, simple strips of cloth or leather wound around the breasts to flatten rather than enhance.

There are some written medieval sources on possible female breast support, but they are rather vague. Henri de Mondeville, surgeon to Philip the Fair of France and his

successor Louis X, wrote in his *Cirurgia* in 1312–20: “Some women... insert two bags in their dresses, adjusted to the breasts, fitting tight, and they put them [the breasts] into them [the bags] every morning and fasten them when possible with a matching band”.

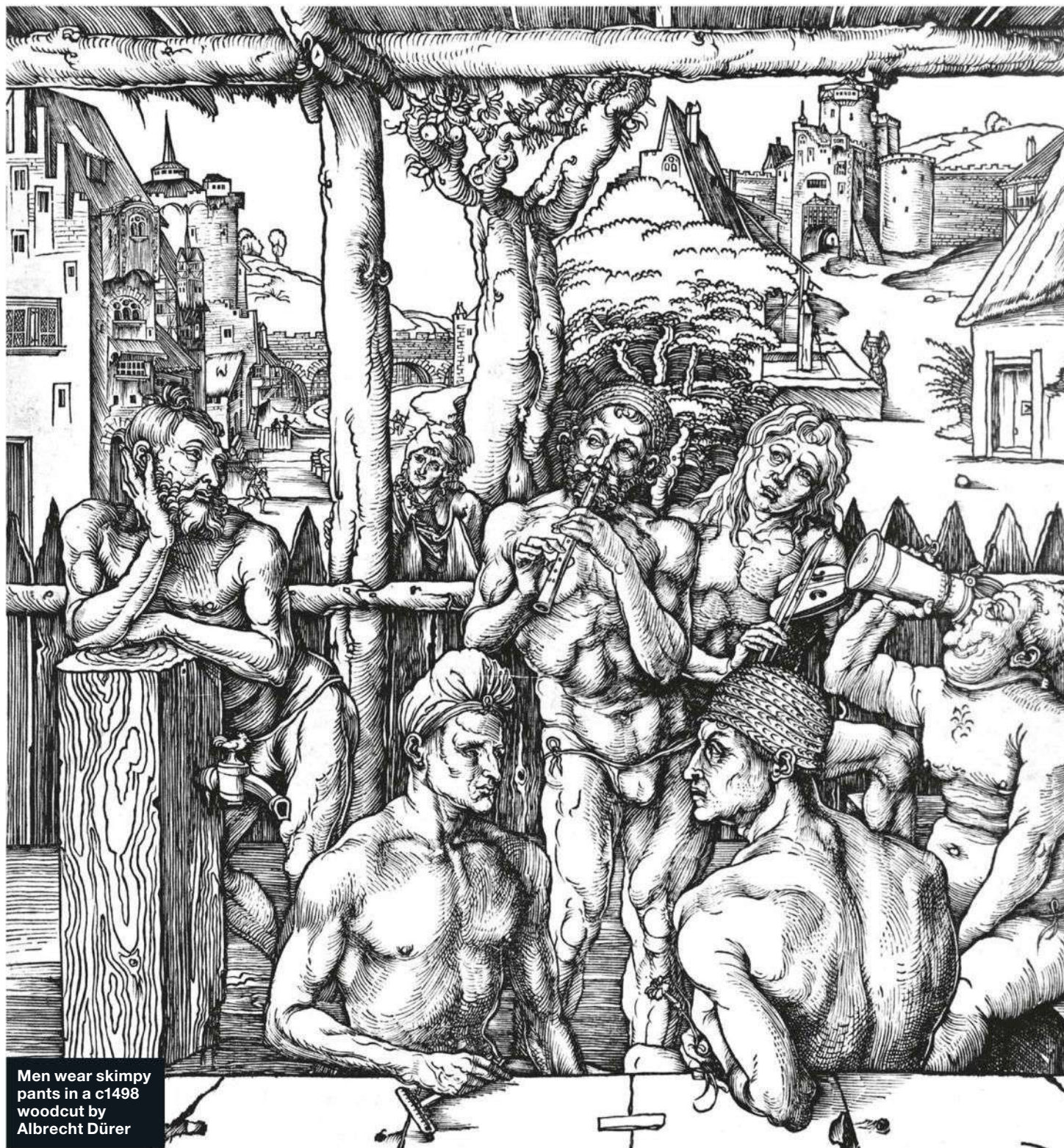
Support and enhance

These ‘bags’ served the same purpose as antique breast bands – that is, to contain too-large breasts. However, the “shirts with bags in which they put their breasts” that Konrad Stolle complained about in his chronicle of Thuringia and Erfurt in 1480 seem to have had the opposite effect, because he concludes his description with the words

“The find of linen underpants in Lengberg arouses anew the question: male or female?”



Items found at Lengberg Castle –
‘breastbags’ (top) and ‘bra’ (above)
– are not so different from a typical
longline bra of the 1950s (left)



Men wear skimpy pants in a c1498 woodcut by Albrecht Dürer

“all indecent”. An unknown 15th-century author of southern Germany was definitely referring to breast-enhancement in his satirical poem as he wrote: “Many [a woman] makes two breastbags, with them she roams the streets, so that all the young men that look at her, can see her beautiful breasts; But whose breasts are too large, makes tight pouches, so there is no gossip in the city about her big breasts.” As we can see, medieval bras worked both ways.

Two of the ‘bras’ from Lengberg Castle seem to be ‘shirts with bags’. Unfortunately, they are fragmented, with only one cup preserved on each. But they appear to have had additional cloth above the cups to cover the cleavage, thus being a combination of a short shirt – ending right below the breasts – and a bra.

The third ‘bra’ looks a lot more like a modern bra and is possibly what the unknown German author called *tuttenseck* – “breast-bags”. It has two broad shoulder straps, and

the partially torn edges at the cups indicate a back strap. This ‘bra’ is elaborately decorated with needle-lace on the shoulder straps. All ‘bags’ are decorated at the lower end with finger-loop-braided laces and needle-lace.

The fourth ‘bra’ can best be described with the modern term ‘longline bra’, a type of bra popular in the 1950s but still fashioned today. The cups are each made from two pieces of linen sewn together, and the surrounding fabric extends down to the bottom of the

ribcage with a row of six eyelets on the side of the body for fastening with a lace. There are narrow shoulder straps, and needle-lace decorates the cleavage. Two of the bras have been radiocarbon-dated at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, giving dates ranging from the end of the 14th to the second half of the 15th century.

We don't know if all women in the Middle Ages wore 'breast-bags' – though some definitely did. But while it might have been socially acceptable to do so in order to flatten the bosom, the complaints and satirical comments suggest that breast-enhancement was not generally approved of.

It is believed that women did not wear underpants or drawers until as late as the very end of the 18th century. The find of a pair of completely preserved linen underpants in Lengberg arouses anew the question: male or female?

Who's wearing the pants?

The underpants from Lengberg are of a type that developed during the late 14th and 15th century, when men started to wear joined (full) hose or trousers instead of single-legged (split) hose. Thus, long-legged braies were no longer needed to fill the gap between the two trouser legs. Spread out, the underpants have a slightly hourglass-shaped cut with narrow straps at the corners. They were repaired three times with linen patches, now overlaying one another.

Paintings, woodcuts and book illustrations of both sacral and secular themes show only men wearing this type of underpants: a small piece of cloth covering the buttocks and pubic area fastened with narrow straps tied in a bow at the hips. When women are shown wearing pants it's always in the context of 'a world turned upside down'.

Trousers and underpants were considered symbols of male power, so women wearing them were pugnacious wives trying to usurp the authority of their husbands, or women of low morality. A book illustration from a German translation of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Famous Women*, published in 1474, displays Semiramis, queen of the Assyrians, and two of her ladies-in-waiting wearing underpants (see page 21). But of her it is said: "Semiramis, a woman once Ninus's wife, masqueraded as a boy, his son" and "it is believed that she gave herself to many men. Among her lovers was her own son Ninyas."

However, the same thing can be said of underpants as bras: just because it was thought that women should not wear them doesn't mean they never did – especially

"Why would the queen of England not have claimed the right to wear drawers? And who would have questioned her?"



Underpants such as these found at Lengberg Castle developed from the late 14th century after split hose fell out of fashion

because such garments come in handy during certain days of the month. So what *did* women do during their menstruation?

According to some stories, told mostly by men, they did nothing – evoking disgusting images of women leaving behind a trail of blood wherever they went. Yet two translations of the Bible, the Douay–Rheims Bible from 1609–10 and the King James Bible from 1611, mention "rags of a menstruous woman" (Isaiah 64:6) and "menstruous cloth" (Isaiah 30:22). To have it translated that way means the translator must have known about the possible use of a strip of cloth for this purpose – and underpants would have kept those 'rags' in place.

In the 16th century some Italian women wore drawers. Eleanor of Toledo (1522–62) owned a pair in 1561, and 50 years later many pairs were made for Maria de Medici (1573–1642), the new queen of France. But women wearing drawers was still frowned upon by some. In his *Costumes of Different Nations* of 1594, Pietro Bertelli shows only the Venetian courtesan wearing drawers.

On the other hand, the Englishman Fynes Moryson, who travelled continental Europe between 1591 and 1595, wrote about the Italian ladies: "The city virgins, and especially gentlewomen... in many places wear silk or linen breeches under their gowns." But he also writes: "I have seen courtesans... appparelled like men, in carnation or light coloured doublets and breeches." And it seems that some women in

the Netherlands also wore drawers: Moryson tells us that "some of the chief women not able to abide the extreme cold... do use to wear breeches of linen or silk".

What about women in England? Did Elizabeth I wear drawers? Her funeral effigy, made in 1603, wears a corset and drawers. Though some claim that the narrow drawers nailed on to the effigy were added as late as 1760, the 'Accounts of the Great Wardrobe' (1558–1603) note that John Colte was paid £10 to provide "the Image representing her late Majestie... with one paire of straite bodies, a paire of drawers". In addition, there is a reference to Elizabeth having owned "six pairs of double linen hose of fine hollande cloth" made in 1587. Are these drawers or stockings? Why would the queen of England not have claimed for herself the same right to wear drawers as did the queen of France? And who would have dared question her choice of underwear?

And in the 17th century? In his diary Samuel Pepys, suspecting his wife of having an affair, wrote on 15 May 1663: "But I am ashamed to think what a course I did take by lying to see whether my wife did wear drawers today as she used to, and other things to raise my suspicion of her; but I found no true cause of doing it," and on 4 June 1663: "...and I did so watch to see my wife put on drawers, which poor soul she did."

Of course, this does not mean that all women in the Middle Ages or early modern times owned bras or drawers, but some did. Considering the Lengberg 'breastbags' were found in a castle, they were probably most common among members of the upper class or women who were, for whatever reason, not overly concerned with social standards. ■

Beatrix Nutz is a researcher at the Institute of Archaeology, University of Innsbruck. She is writing her thesis on the textiles from Lengberg supervised by Harald Stadler, funded by the Tyrolean Science Fund

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

- **Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd** by Janet Arnold (Maney, 1988)
- **The History of Underclothes** by C Willett and Phillis Cunnington (Dover, 2000)



A c1520 stained glass window from St Apen in Cologne shows a dog sharing its owners' bed. Pets were a popular addition to medieval households

*"Of smale houndes hadde
she that she fedde
With rosted flessch, or milk
and wastel-breed.
But soore wepte she if
oon of hem were deed,
Or if men smoot it
with a yerde smerte"*

When Geoffrey Chaucer described the bond between the prioress Madame Eglentyne and her dogs in *The Canterbury Tales* (above), the 14th-century English poet described what was, to him, an all too familiar attitude. The love of pets, it seems, has been with us for centuries. The prioress – who fed her pampered pets on the very finest white bread (wastel-breed) and cried if any of them was smartly hit with a rod (smoot with a yerde smerte) – was by no means alone.

Yet the medieval pet emerged from the past only recently through the research of Kathleen Walker-Meikle, whose doctorate at University College London drew on four centuries of European account books, chronicles, poetry, iconography and romance literature to reveal how widespread the obsession with keeping small animals was in the Middle Ages. Most were little dogs, varieties of terrier, spaniel and hound. There were also squirrels, rabbits, cats and tamed birds. All were loved by their medieval owners.

Walker-Meikle recommends a walk through a major art collection to get a sense of

The medieval menagerie

We think of ourselves today as a nation of animal lovers but, as **William Holland** discovers, pets were popular in the Middle Ages, too



The c1480 German *Fables of Bidpai* show caged birds in a medieval house

this love of animals. “The moment I started looking for pets, I found them everywhere,” she says. “The National Gallery in London, for example, is infested with them.” And sure enough, an overlooked menagerie peers out from the walls of the gallery. One young woman holds her pet squirrel on a fine chain; another carries a small dog under her arm; a third has a parrot perched on one hand.

Animals were enormously important in the Middle Ages, not only for food but also for transport, labour, hunting and war. Yet the pet served no material purpose – it just provided companionship. It lived in the home, slept in its owner’s bedchamber and often ate from the dining table.

It was rare for a pet to belong to a man. Men could feel affection for their hunting dogs and warhorses but a pet was regarded as an effeminate sign of weakness. The English king Richard II was said to keep a greyhound on his bed – a sure sign that something was not quite right. When his subjects discussed the charge that the French monarch Henry III owned a lot of little dogs, it was definitely a slur on his reputation. Mostly, pets were the possessions of wealthy women, familiar with their often central roles in medieval romances. Many nuns and monks, keen for companionship during days spent in contemplation and prayer, were also pet owners.

Like prioress Eglentyne, many pet owners lavished their animals with foods that most peasants simply could not afford for themselves. But that rich diet could be damaging. In his tome *De Animalibus*, the 13th-century scholar Albertus Magnus was prompted to include advice on how to help dogs overcome constipation caused by eating the wrong sort of food.

Pet owners bought showy accessories for their animals: silver bells, decorated collars and brocade cushions to rest upon. As such, Walker-Meikle has noted that they displayed the social status of their mistresses every bit as much as a piece of jewellery or fancy gown.

A ban on pets in the convent

But such extravagance could provoke ire. The 14th-century English preacher John Bromyard complained that many of the priests who kept pets cared more for their animals than for their flocks. In the 13th century, Eudes Rigaud, archbishop of Rouen, embarked on a crusade against the keeping of excessive numbers of pets in his diocese – a sign, he felt, of moral decay. When he visited the convent of St Sauveur in Evreux, he was horrified to see lots of small dogs, birds and squirrels that the nuns fed and named. He ordered them to cast out the animals. At Holy Trinity in Caen, he insisted that the nuns release the caged larks he found there.

“One preacher complained that many priests cared more for their pets than for their flocks”

The nuns, however, ignored his protests. Over the next 19 years Rigaud had to issue two more orders banning the keeping of pets at St Sauveur, while from one ex-prioress at Villarcieux, keen to retain her pet bird, he received a retort that “greatly displeased us”.

As the Renaissance dawned, the new breed of Humanist scholar was quick to adopt the keeping of pets, perhaps as a badge of a cloistered life. They also used their animals to exhibit their learning and sensibilities by producing Latin verses dedicated to their cats and dogs. Such eulogies might be circulated among scholars or sent by sympathetic friends to the grieving owner of a deceased pet.

Petrarch, the first of the great Renaissance Humanists, often wrote about his dogs; he penned a moving epitaph for one called Zabot, while the 15th-century Italian architect Alberti celebrated his dog in a long elegy, *De Canis*. But few captured the depth of feeling that the medieval pet owner held for his or her pet as powerfully as the 12th-century abbot Thierry of Thronod:

“Weep dogs, if you have time to weep, if you are able to weep, weep dogs: the pup Pitulus is dead. Who was Pitulus? The chief concern and grief of his master.

What was his function? That his large master should love a small dog – that was his duty, to play before his master.

What was the use of that? There was none, if not laughter.

Whoever saw you, whoever knew you, loved you and grieves now over your demise.” **II**

William Holland is a journalist who specialises in historical articles, and has written for the *Sunday Times*, *Times Educational Supplement* and *Times Higher Education Supplement*. He studied medieval history at Lancaster University

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

► **Medieval Pets** by Kathleen Walker-Meikle (Boydell Press, 2014)

► **The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages** by Joyce Salisbury (Routledge, 2010)

► **In the Company of Animals** by James Serpell (CUP, 1996)

Curious pets

Medieval animal-lovers didn’t just settle for traditional dogs and cats – more exotic creatures were also tamed or caged



Monkeys and parrots

Robert, bishop of Durham in the late 13th century, was noted for the attention he gave to his two pet monkeys.

The chronicler Richard of Durham wrote that the prelate doted on the animals, feeding them peeled almonds. Eleanor of Castile, wife of Edward I, was presented with a gift of parrots by the princess of Salerno. Exotic animals, transported at great cost from foreign lands, were prized pets for the rich. They were the ultimate status symbols in the Middle Ages.

Squirrels and starlings

Easily captured, red squirrels and common birds, like larks and starlings, made popular pets. The animals could be tamed and were then treated with great affection by their owners. Though of little monetary value, they were nonetheless treasured by the wealthy, who could then lavish them with rich accessories. There is little evidence that the peasantry kept

unproductive pets. But they did have some animal companionship from cats and dogs, which could contribute by keeping vermin at bay and providing protection.



Weasels

Alfonso the Wise, a 13th-century king of Leon and Castile, was known to have a pet weasel. He wrote poetry about the animal and even kept it by him when he travelled, caged in a special container strapped to the side of his saddle. Despite the taboo against men keeping pets, Alfonso was widely judged a special case, renowned as a scholar, and seems to have escaped the kind of stigma attached to other worldly men who cherished animals.



Groats in your purse

Ian Mortimer, author of *The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England*, takes us on a shopping trip to a 14th-century marketplace

The poet WH Auden once suggested that, in order to understand your own country, you need to have lived in at least two others. But what about your own time? By the same reckoning, you need to have experienced at least two other centuries. This presents us with some difficulties – but, through historical research, coming to terms with another century is not impossible. We can approach the past as if it really is ‘a foreign country’ – somewhere we might visit. And we do not actually need to travel in time to appreciate it; just the idea of visiting the past allows us to see life differently, and more immediately. Come shopping in the late 14th century and see for yourself.

The marketplace

“Ribbs of beef and many a pie!” you hear someone call over your shoulder. Turning, you see a young lad walking through the crowd bearing a tray laden with wooden bowls of cooked meats from a local shop. All around him, people are moving, gesturing, talking. So many have come in from the surrounding villages that this town of about 3,000 inhabitants is today thronged with twice as many.

Here are men in knee-length brown tunics, driving cattle before them. Here are their wives in long kirtles, with wimples around their heads and necks. Those men in short tunics and hoods are valets in a knight's household. Those in long gowns with high collars and beaver-fur hats are wealthy merchants. Across the marketplace more peasants are leading flocks of sheep, or packhorses and carts loaded with crates of chickens.

Crowds are noisy. People are talking so much that chatter could almost be the whole purpose of the market – and in many ways it is. This is the one open public area in the town where people can meet and exchange information. When a company performs a mystery play, it is to the marketplace that they will drag the cart containing their stage, set and costumes. When the town crier rings his bell to address the people of the town, it is in the marketplace that the crowd will gather to hear him. The marketplace is the heart of any town – indeed, the very definition of a town is that it has a market.

What can you buy? Let's start at the fishmongers' stalls. You may have heard that many sorts of freshwater and sea fish are eaten in medieval England. More than 150 species are consumed by the nobility and churchmen, drawn from their own fishponds as well as the rivers and seas. But in most markets it is the popular varieties that you see glistening in the wet, hay-filled crates. Mackerel, herring, lamprey, cod, eel, Aberdeen fish (cured salmon and herring), and stockfish (salt cod) are the most common varieties. Crabs and lobsters are transported live, in barrels. In season you will see fresh salmon – attracting the hefty price of four or five shillings each. A fresh turbot can cost even more: up to seven shillings.

Next we come to an area set aside for corn. Sacks of wheat, barley, oats and rye are piled up, ready for sale to the townsmen. Then the space given over to livestock: goats, sheep, pigs and cows. A corner is devoted to garden



French women spin wool, one of the many commodities on sale in medieval marketplaces

produce – apples, pears, vegetables, garlic and herbs – yet the emphasis of a medieval diet is on meat, cheese and cereal crops. In a large town you will find spicerers selling such exotic commodities as pepper, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, liquorice and many different types of sugar. These are only for the wealthy. When your average skilled workman earns only two shillings (2s) in a week, he can hardly afford to buy cloves at four shillings (4s) a pound or ginger costing 20 pence (20d) a pound.

A vendor removes the udders from a cow in this contemporary depiction of a 14th-century butcher's shop







Making sense of the medieval marketplace

1 Rooms with a view

The windows above all of the shops are glazed, which is what one would expect – these are the chambers where the merchants and their families live and sleep. The windows to the attic rooms above are probably closed with an internal wooden shutter at night, especially if the servants sleep up there.

2 High-street fashions

The three men in the shop at the far end of the street are furriers. As you can see from the burghers in the foreground, furs are regularly worn around the cuffs and collars (fox, cat and rabbit are the most common). Beaver fur hats are popular, too. In England, only the most important people are permitted to wear certain furs such as weasel and ermine.

3 A cut-throat industry

The barber is using a cut-throat razor. In the 15th century, shaving is common in England; Henry V, for example, is shaved regularly. In the 14th century, however, relatively few men are shaved, because a beard is a sign of virility. A set of wooden bowls above the barber's shop acts as a sign. Presumably this barber also lets blood as part of his service.

4 Made to measure

In the tailor's shop, completed clothes are hung up ready for collection, while the tailor and his apprentice work on new garments. There are almost no off-the-peg clothes. If you want an item of clothing, you buy the cloth you want from a mercer and take it to the tailor for him to fashion into the desired garment.

5 A drink to good health

The sign *bon Ipocras* ('Good Hypocras') is written above the apothecary's shop. Hypocras was a restorative drink made with wine and spices and filtered through a 'Hippocratic sleeve', a cloth sieve devised by the Greek physician Hippocrates to filter out the sediment. It is often consumed with wafers by the wealthy.

6 Sugar and spice

The apothecary's shop is well stocked with red and white jars of medicinal substances. In front, on the green cloth, are his mixing bowls, where he makes up medicine according to physicians' prescriptions. The tall white cone on the right is sugar, which was regularly used as a spice.

7 The state of the roads

As this image shows a 15th-century continental town (taken from the *Livre de Gouvernement des Princes* by Gilles de Rome), it is not surprising that the street is paved. It would be unusual to find paving in a medieval English town; even in London, people complain about the state of the roads.

Vendors tout their wares and services in this 15th-century depiction of a medieval marketplace

BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

The rest of the marketplace performs two functions. Producers come to sell fleeces, sacks of wool, tanned hides, furs, iron, steel and tin for resale farther afield. The other function is to sell manufactured commodities to local people: brass and bronze cooking vessels, candlesticks and spurs, pewterware, woollen cloth, silk, linen, canvas, carts, rushes (for hall floors), glass, faggots, coal, nails, horseshoes and planks of wood. Planks, you ask? Consider the difficulties of transporting a tree trunk to a saw pit, then getting two men to saw it into planks with only a handsaw between them.

Everyone in medieval society is heavily dependent on each other for such supplies, and the marketplace is where all these interdependencies meet.

Haggling

The prices of essential items such as ale and bread are fixed by law, but for almost everything that has been manufactured you will have to negotiate. Caxton's 15th-century dialogue book is based on a 14th-century language guide, and gives the following lesson in how to haggle with a cloth vendor:

"Dame, what hold ye the ell (45 inches) of this cloth? Or what is worth the cloth whole?
In short, so to speak, how much the ell?"
"Sire, reason; ye shall have it good and cheap."
"Yea, truly, for cattle. Dame, ye must me win. Take heed what I shall pay."
"Four shillings for the ell, if it please you."
"For so much would I have good scarlet."
"But I have some which is not of the best which I would not give for seven shillings."
"But this is no such cloth, of so much money, that know ye well!"
"Sire, what is it worth?"
"Dame, it were worth to me well three shillings."
"That is evil-boden."
"But say certainly how shall I have it without a part to leave?"
"I shall give it ye at one word: ye shall pay five shillings, certainly if ye have them for so many ells, for I will abate nothing."

And so you open your purse which hangs from the cords attached to your belt and find five shillings. Except that there is no shilling coin in the late 14th century. The smallest gold coins are the half-noble (3s 4d) and the quarter-noble (1s 8d), so if you



have one each of these, you can make up the sum. Alternatively, you will have to make it up from the silver coins: groats (4d), half-groats, pennies, halfpence and farthings (1/4d).

Regulations

A well-run market is crucial to the standing of a town, so it is heavily regulated. The actual policing tends to be undertaken by the town's bedels or bailiffs, who enforce regulations such as these: "No horses may be left standing in the marketplace on market days" and "Every man is to keep the street in front of his tenement clean." Most towns have between 40 and 70 regulations; anyone breaking them will be taken to the borough court and fined.

There are reasons to be grateful for the supervision of trade. Short measures are a notorious problem, and turners normally have to swear to make wooden measures of the appropriate size. Clerks in borough courts will tell you of cooking pots being made out of soft metal and coated with brass, and loaves



A miniature showing a bishop blessing a medieval market in France



“Look at the **meagre diet of the poor, their rotten teeth**, their resilience in the face of death”

of bread baked with stones in them to make them up to the legally required weight. Wool is stretched before it is woven to make it go farther – but it will later shrink. Pepper is sold damp, making it swell and weigh more, but it will rot sooner. Meat is sometimes sold even though it is putrid, wine after it has turned sour, and bread when it has gone green.

If you are the victim of malpractice, go straight to the authorities. The perpetrator will be pilloried – literally. The pillory is the wooden board that clasps the guilty man’s head and hands, shamefully exposing him to the insults of the crowd. A butcher selling bad meat can expect to be dragged through the streets of the town on a hurdle and then placed in the pillory with the rotten meat burned under him. A vintner caught selling foul wine

is dragged to the pillory on a hurdle, forced to drink a draught of the offending liquor, then set in the pillory where the remainder is poured over his head. The sweetness of the revenge makes up for the sourness of the wine.

Shopping in the 14th century will often remind you of how much we have in common with our medieval forebears. It will, likewise, alert you to the huge differences between us. We are not the same as our ancestors. Look at how young they are – the median age is just 21 – and look at the meagre diet of the poor, their rotten teeth as they smile, their resilience in the face of death.

Consider how rough and smelly the streets are, and how small the sheep and cattle are in the marketplace. When a fight breaks out over some stolen goods, and the bedels intervene,

Prices in the 1390s*

Ale, ordinary	¾d–1d per gallon
Wine from Bordeaux	3d–4d per gallon
Bacon	15d per side
Chicken	2d each
Cod, fresh	20d each
Sugar, loaf of	18d per lb
Apples	7d per 100
Eggs	33d for 425
A furred gown	5s 4d

* Prices from the account books of Henry of Lancaster, Earl of Derby

Wages/salaries in the 1390s

The king’s physician	£40 per year
Officer in the royal household	£20 per year
Mason	£8 per year (6d per day)
Carpenter	4¼d per day
Thatcher	4¼d per day
Labourer	3¼d per day
Valet in a lord’s household	£1 10s per year
Manservant in a yeoman’s household	£1 per year
Maid servant in a yeoman’s household	10s per year

In old money, there were 12 pence (d) to the shilling (s) and 20 shillings to the pound (£)

you may see how the spirit of the people is so similar to our own and yet how much the process of managing that spirit has changed. For if the stolen goods are of sufficient value, the thieves will be summarily tried and hanged the same day. This is what makes history so interesting – the differences between us across the centuries, as well as the similarities.

At dusk – just before the great gates of the city close for the night and you see everyone leaving the adjacent taverns – you may begin to think that Auden was on to something. To understand ourselves, we must first see society differently – and remember that history is the study of the living, not the dead. **H**

Ian Mortimer is a historian and author of *The Time Traveller’s Guide to Medieval England* (Vintage, 2009)

ON THE PODCAST

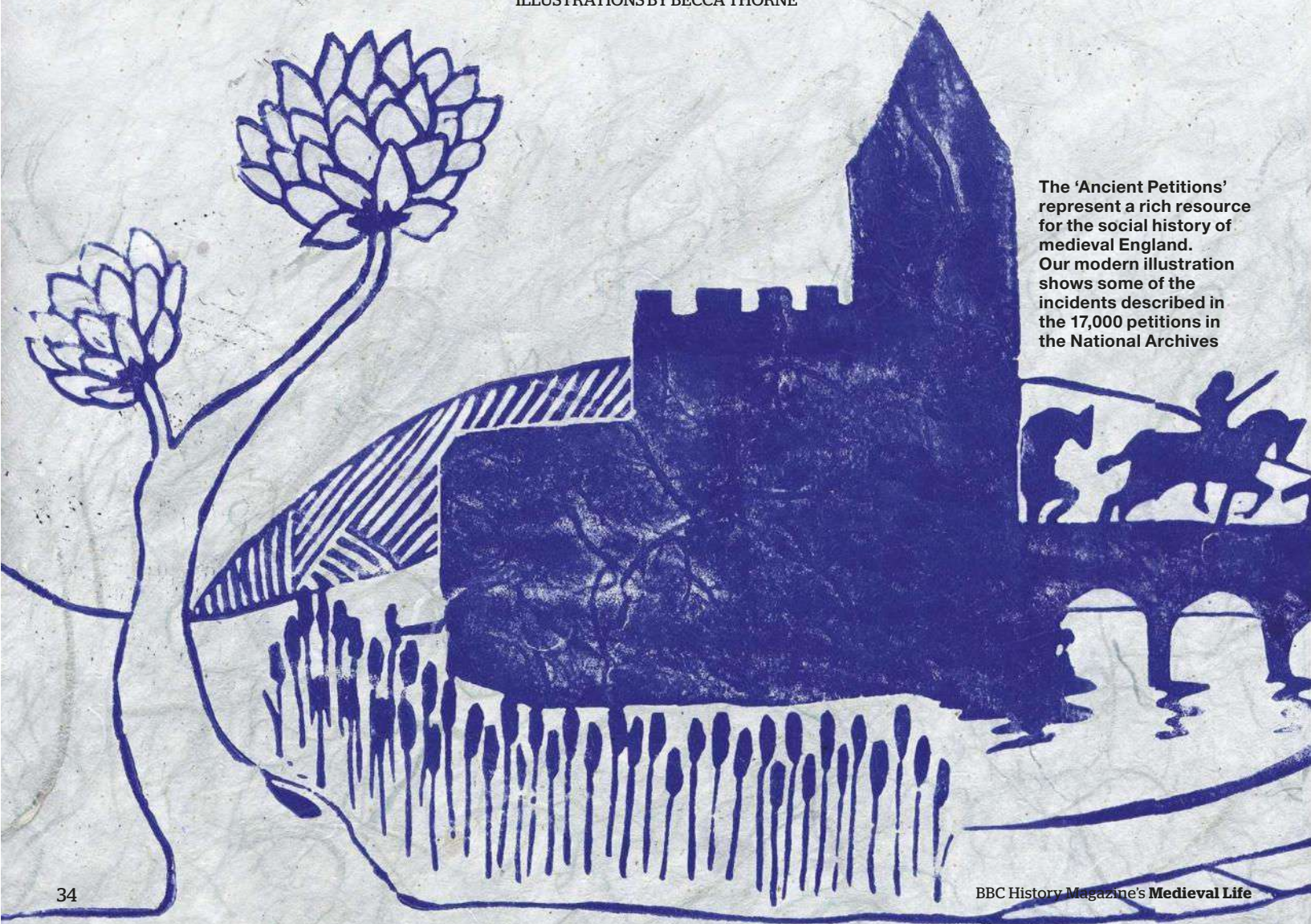
► Ian Mortimer discusses life in medieval towns on our podcast historyextra.com/medieval-life

KING'S JUSTICE

Medieval grievances could be resolved with a direct appeal to king or parliament - and, as **Mark Ormrod** explains, many of these petitions reveal colourful details of daily life some 700 years ago

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BECCA THORNE

The 'Ancient Petitions' represent a rich resource for the social history of medieval England. Our modern illustration shows some of the incidents described in the 17,000 petitions in the National Archives



In 1378 a Kentish knight named John Cornwall launched a series of violent raids on Westenhanger Castle near Hythe, the home of the widowed gentlewoman Lettice Kyriel. John adopted a series of ruses to get the castle and its chatelaine for himself. He disguised himself as a friar and dressed his thugs as Lettice's servants; and, accompanied by bands of first 40 and later 60 men, he used ladders to scale the walls and beat down the doors and windows of the castle.

But the unscrupulous knight had reckoned without the resourcefulness of his opponent. The first attack had been seen off when Lettice's people managed to raise the hue and cry, bringing a posse of local men to her aid. And during the most recent assault, Lettice had hidden herself in the castle moat for four hours in order to evade capture. She also lost no time in taking legal proceedings against John for damage to person and property.

What Lettice feared most, however, was John's ability to manipulate people in high places and get immunity from prosecution by royal pardon. Immediately after her ordeal in the moat, Lettice wrote to the lords of parliament, then sitting at Gloucester, asking their assurance that John be brought to account for his crimes.

Lettice's colourful story survives today among the 17,000 'Ancient Petitions' in the National Archives, a series of documents that provides an immensely rich resource for the social history of later medieval England.

Many of the documents in the Ancient Petitions were written because their narrators could not get justice by the normal routes in

the king's courts, so had to appeal to a higher source of authority. This involved approaching the king and his council, usually at the time that parliament was sitting.

The origins of petitioning lie in the efforts made by Edward I at the end of the 13th century to turn parliament into a forum for the resolution of such grievances. By the later 14th century it was common for petitioners to address their complaints to the lords and/or the commons in parliament in the hope that private quarrels might be taken up as matters of public concern.

Because the issues at stake were often ones for which the common law made no provision, petitioners appealed to principles of natural justice. They were not, therefore, constrained by normal legal formulae, and often supplied a great deal of incidental detail that is lost from the official record of the courts.

One of the remarkable things about petitions is their social range: almost all classes and conditions of men – and, as Lettice demonstrates, women – are represented here. Yet, inevitably, the costs and logistics associated with submitting a petition gave the advantage to more prosperous people. Petitioners who presented themselves as 'poor' were often observing a rhetorical

“Almost all classes and conditions of men and women are represented here”

Petition by Lettice Kyriel, 1378, against her attacker John Cornwall

“To the noble lords of parliament, Lettice who was the wife of John de Kyriel, knight, request that, whereas she was at her castle of Westenhanger in the county of Kent [on 7 February 1378], there came John de Cornwaille, knight, in a friar's habit. He deprived Lettice's servants of their clothes and dressed his own servants in them, and he came to the castle with 40 armed men and broke the doors of the hall and the chambers of the castle, holding Lettice in torment for four hours until the country was raised, for fear of which he went away. And he has made several further assaults against Lettice... so that she dare not leave the castle, and holds vigil there as in times of war.

And now [on 28 October], John Cornwaille came to the castle by night, with 60 armed men with ladders of war; and they scaled the castle, broke the doors and windows, and chased Lettice into the water where she stayed, out of fear, for four hours until she was close to death. John, assuming that Lettice was dead, took her horses and other goods and chattels, to the value of a thousand marks, and went away... May it please you, as a work of charity, to ask our lord the king that writs be sent to all the sheriffs of England to arrest [John] and put him in prison... and that no protection or charter of pardon be granted to John for the horrible misdeeds above named.



To the right high mighty prince Edward the first
begotten Son of the King our sovereign lord

Humble beseecheth and noble grace petyously complaining for pure Justice Shete that in the
quide and large continued service done to hym and same Constance his wife by the said
one of the Manors of Foston in the Countie of Duntunpton of which Annuite he said Shete
hath hadde therof yearly payment till now late and yet he said Shete and how of the
conformacion of the same made to he said Shete not withstanding And he said Shete by not
suche petyche that he came not for his service by the countie of the same late and yet the said
summe tenderly to receive and to send he said Shete to the said John Pallet Shete to app
he grace to be bought ther to answer to the summe.

9

An extract from the petition addressed by Eleanor Shete of Fordington, Dorset to the young Edward, Prince of Wales, in 1481. In it, Shete complains that John Pallet, the son of a local knight, has failed to honour an agreement to grant her five marks of annual rent

You can see more Ancient Petitions online

On the National Archives website you can search the series of Ancient Petitions, which includes petitions addressed to the king, the chancellor and various other officers of state.

They include information about the parties involved and the locality. Most petitions before the mid-15th century are in Anglo-Norman French. After that date they are mainly in Middle English. Be prepared with a topic or location in mind to help you plan your search – looking at petitioners in your home town or village is particularly interesting.

HOW TO SEARCH THE PETITIONS

1. Go to the website at:
<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/advanced-search>
2. Enter any name or keyword to define your search
3. Enter a year range (optional)
4. Enter SC8 in the box 'Search for or within references' (SC8 is the code for Ancient Petitions). This will generate details of relevant petitions and will provide you with links to access free digital facsimiles of the originals.

convention rather than telling the truth about their economic capacity.

But there are also many indications that petitions could be used by little people as recourse against the great. In an early case of enclosure (c1414), the peasant tenants of Darlton and Ragnall in Nottinghamshire complained that Sir Richard Stanhope was taking over common pastures in their villages and depriving them of the wherewithal to pay their dues to the king.

In other cases, claims of destitution seem quite real. In an interesting play on the antagonisms that were to provoke Edward I to expel the Jews from England in 1290, Walter of Reading complained that he had been unjustly accused of a murder carried out by a member of Oxford's Jewish community

called Isaac. Walter, who was out of the country fulfilling his Christian duties by making pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, expressed his frustration at the fact that he had been outlawed for the alleged offence and that his wife and children had been thus reduced to beggary.



In 1322, Constance Halliday of Pontefract similarly reported that, as a result of the recent disgrace and execution of the Earl of Lancaster, she was unable to collect the considerable debts owed by the earl's men to her late husband, and that she and her 15 children had been left to starve. Such stories provide vivid reminders of the local and personal reverberations of great social forces and political events during the Middle Ages.

Petitions also provide striking testimony to the material conditions of everyday life. Fierce weather was the cause of many a mishap. The people of Cockermouth in Cumberland reported that all three bridges in the town had been destroyed by a great flood suffered at Christmas 1304. A few years earlier, the Franciscan friars of Bury St Edmunds had expressed their concern that, as a result of the proposed removal of the town's courthouse, people would take refuge from bad weather in the friary church, where the resulting commotion of humans and horses would endanger divine service. Fire was also a major hazard: in 1348 the people of Tamworth, Staffordshire made a special plea for reduction of taxes as a result of a very serious conflagration that had destroyed much of the town.

That the economic infrastructure depended so much on the forces of nature is emphasised by a petition from the inhabitants of Lincolnshire complaining that, as a result of the recent destruction of two important watermills, the people of the county town were now dependent on windmills to grind corn. If there was no wind, they said, there was no bread.

The hair-raising tales of criminality

“Hair-raising tales of criminality conjured up by beleaguered petitioners prompt interest in the Ancient Petitions”

conjured up by beleaguered petitioners inevitably prompt much interest in the Ancient Petitions. Late medieval society was convinced that the law was driven by money, and that the servants and retainers of great men were able to use their lords' patronage as cover for frequent petty tyrannies committed against lesser folk. In 1481 one petitioner claimed that all of the many allegations of robbery and extortion against John Abrey of South Weston in Oxfordshire would come to nothing so long as Abrey wore the green and white livery of Edward IV's son, the Prince of Wales.

At times of major political discord it is clear that the retainers of rebellious lords could seriously undermine the rule of law. In 1322 Maline of Doncaster complained that Lord Mowbray, who had supported the Earl of Lancaster's recent rebellion against Edward II, had gathered his men from north Nottinghamshire and south Yorkshire and sent them in warlike fashion to seize the person and goods of Maline's brother, the vicar of Rossington. They then held the luckless priest to ransom at Hucknall, outside Nottingham, for the very considerable sum of £200.

It may be more than coincidence that the case of the vicar of Rossington occurred in an area that is now particularly associated with the Robin Hood legends and at a time of great civil strife when the principles of natural justice contained in those legends were a matter of acute public debate. A century later, when the outlaw tales had penetrated popular consciousness across much of England, they even entered into the rhetoric of petitioning.

In 1439 the tenants of Scropton in Derbyshire petitioned the crown about the activities of Peter Venables, a gentleman of Aston, who, with a band of criminals, had gone “into the woods like Robin Hood and his men”. We can imagine these words as actually spoken by the outraged men of Scropton in their conversations with the lawyer hired to compile the petition, and being used to good effect by him in the document compiled for consideration by the House of Commons.

Petitions, therefore, do more than provide a worm's-eye view of medieval life; they burst the bounds of legal convention and speak to us in a language of natural justice that is still recognisable – and relevant – today. **II**

Mark Ormrod is a professor of history at the University of York, and an editor of the series *Fourteenth-Century England* (Boydell).

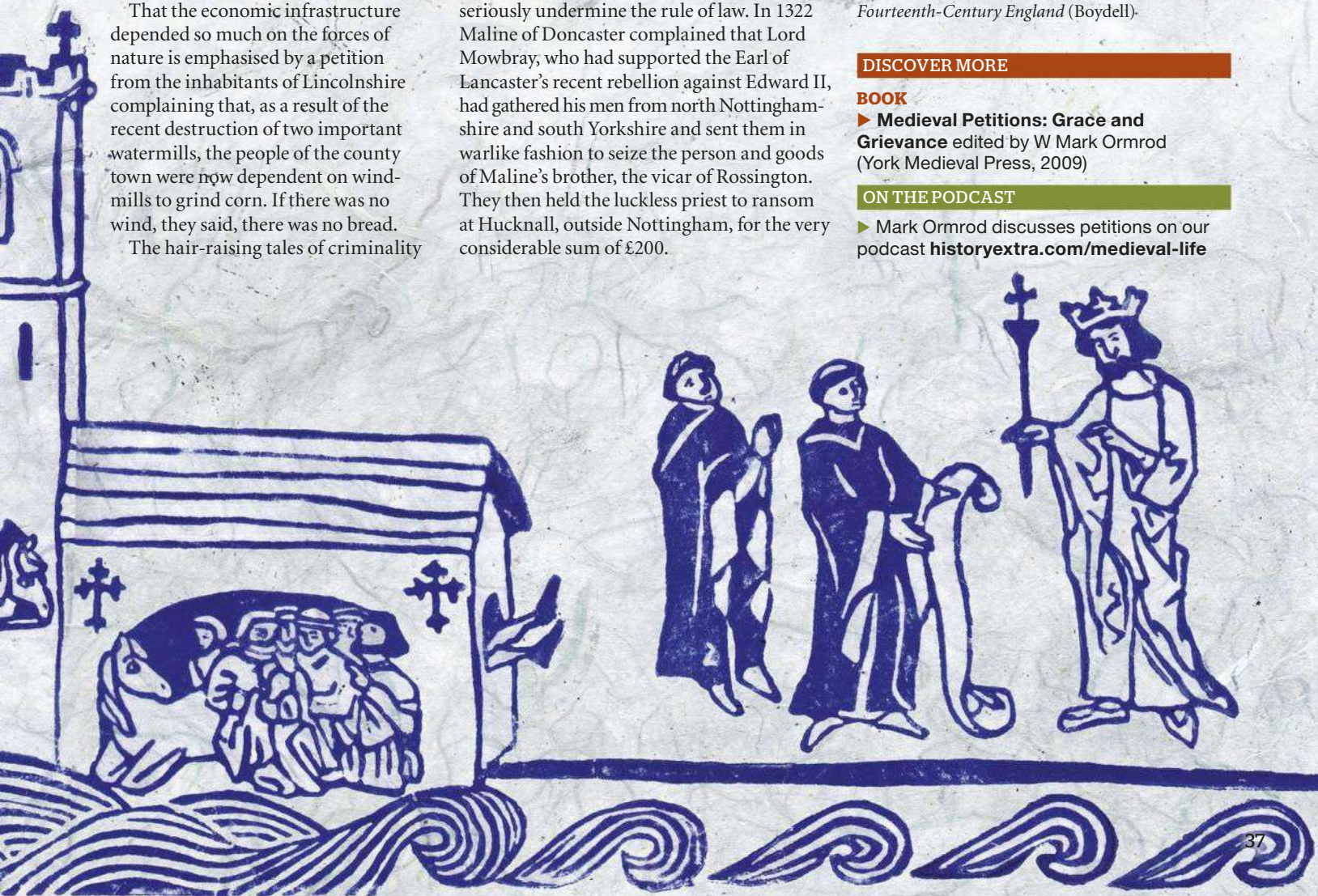
DISCOVER MORE

BOOK

► **Medieval Petitions: Grace and Grievance** edited by W Mark Ormrod (York Medieval Press, 2009)

ON THE PODCAST

► Mark Ormrod discusses petitions on our podcast historyextra.com/medieval-life



How to send a letter...

In the 15th century there was no official postal service, says **Deborah Thorpe**, so getting a letter from A to B involved a series of challenges

1 Send for your scribe

In the 15th century people wrote letters for many reasons - if they could write at all - and the first challenge was to get it down on paper

Late medieval letter-writers were concerned with many of the same topics that move us today. Men and women nurtured long-distance love affairs, lawyers debated legal disputes, and buyers of property discussed houses. Letter-writers ranged from high-ranking servants to royalty.

Women were prominent senders and recipients of mail. For example, there are over 60 surviving letters sent by Margaret Paston of Norfolk to her lawyer husband, John, whose work took him away to London (you can see one overleaf). Correspondence could range from the mundane to the out-of-the-ordinary. A letter that Margaret sent to

John in 1448 urged him to dispatch crossbows to fight off attacks by hostile neighbours. Margaret reported that servants had made bars across the doors and were shooting from every corner of the house. Margaret then goes on to ask for almonds, sugar and cloth to make the children new gowns.

Correspondents often penned the letters themselves - especially if they were merchants or lower-ranking gentlemen. Yet the preferred option was for servants to do the writing - especially for gentlewomen, who rarely put pen to paper. Medieval people did not see handwriting as proof of a letter's authenticity in the way that we do today. So when the handwriting of wealthy men or women does appear, it often looks inelegant - because they had no need to practise.

As the 15th century drew to a close, more correspondents began to write their own letters. However, before then, the best way to put words onto paper was through the hand of a trusted scribe. Once they'd finished writing, scribes could dry the ink quickly by dusting it with ashes from the chimney. Then they'd fold the letter, tie it up with strips of paper, and give it a wax seal.

A 15th-century illustration shows a man writing a letter. Merchants and lower-ranking gentlemen often put pen to paper themselves but wealthy men and gentlewomen were more likely to employ a scribe



in medieval England



“It could be difficult to find a messenger able to travel at the right time – so letters often sat unposted for days”

A lady hands a letter to a messenger in this illustration from the 1370s. She could now only pray that he was up to the challenge of delivering her missive – and that it didn't fall into the wrong hands en route

2 Find a messenger going the right way

In the days before a national postal service, selecting the right man or woman to convey the letter to its destination was critical

Once the name and address was written on the outside, the missive was ready to begin its journey. Though letters traversed England with great frequency in the 15th century, there was no sign yet of a postal system that we would recognise today. That developed only after the appointment of the first master of the posts, Brian Tuke, in 1512.

In the century before any kind of regulated post there were three main ways to send a letter: with your own servant, with a paid messenger or with a carter, who hauled heavy goods around the country.

Using your own servant was the safest and cheapest option, but it was not always possible to spare a member of the household for what might turn out to be a long journey. Paying a messenger or carter to deliver your message was often more convenient, especially if the letter was following a well-travelled route. However, it could be difficult to find a messenger able to travel at the right time – so letters often sat unposted for days.

In 1448, one servant of the knight Sir John Fastolf wrote to excuse his tardiness in replying to his master's correspondence: “If messengers to London could have been found before Christmas, the letters were ready to go.”

3 Have mail guarded from your enemies

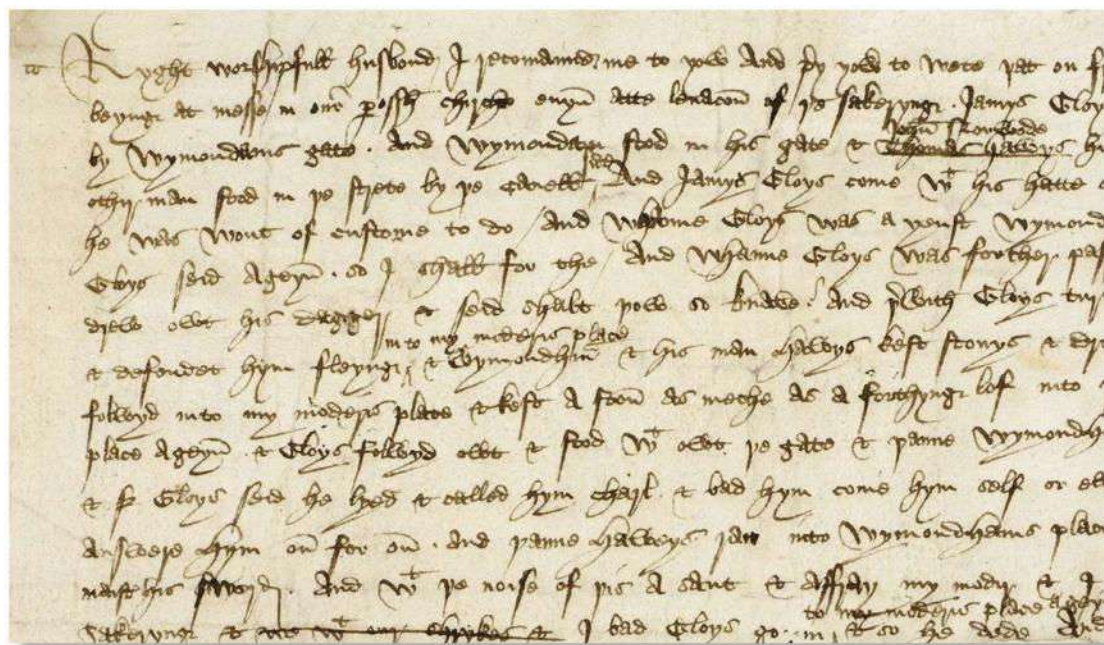
Journeys in medieval England could be hazardous, so correspondents could only pray that their letters weren't intercepted en route

“I would rather a letter be burnt than lost,” wrote a servant of Sir John Fastolf. Why was he moved to reach this conclusion? Because 15th-century England could be a hazardous place for a letter to travel around – especially if the letter contained sensitive information. Medieval writers lived in fear that an enemy might intercept a confidential correspondence and turn it against them as evidence in a legal dispute. The same servant mentioned above added a classical Latin metaphor to demonstrate the strength of his concern: “*Ne forte videant Romani*,” which translates as: “Lest perchance the Romans should see it.” Knowledge was power, especially in the possession of your enemies.

It was not just malice that threatened the medieval missive. With so many letters and other goods travelling around the country, there was a risk that a letter might go astray. This misfortune befell Walter Paston in 1479 when one of his letters was mistakenly dispatched to London with some money sent to the capital for safekeeping. Paston later explained this mishap thus: “Mister Brown had a lot of money in a bag, which he dared not bring with him, and at that time my letter was in the same bag. He forgot to take out the letter, and sent it all together to London.”

"If a letter caused offence, the messenger might have to act as a diplomat"

A 15th-century illustration of the summoner – who travelled the country delivering court summonses – from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*



He is "cursed in the heart"

In a letter from May 1448, a wife warns her husband about a rival

In the letter shown above, Margaret Paston of Norfolk tells her husband, John, about a confrontation she witnessed between their chaplain, James Gloys, and John Wyndham, a rival of the Pastons. Wyndham had shouted at Gloys in the street, because Gloys had not doffed his hat to him. When Gloys made a hostile

remark in reply, Wyndham and his servant brandished a sword and spear at Gloys and called Margaret and her mother "strong whores".

Margaret reports that she put in a complaint to the prior of Norwich, who sent for Wyndham immediately. But that didn't stop Wyndham's servant assaulting Gloys again and

4 Try to track down the letter's recipient

Pity the poor messenger. He might travel hundreds of miles to deliver a letter – then, once he'd arrived, could only pray that someone was home to receive it

If the letter's safe passage to its intended recipient was a source of stress to the correspondent, then spare a thought for the man or woman charged with delivering it.

The medieval equivalent of today's postman sometimes had to travel from one end of the country to the other to convey letters to the person to whom they were addressed. And, as medieval property-owners often moved regularly between several houses, there was no guarantee that the recipient would be at home when they got there.

One letter written in 1450 to the chaplain of Caister Castle in Norfolk gave no fewer than three alternative points of delivery for the bearer to try if the chaplain was not to be found at the castle.

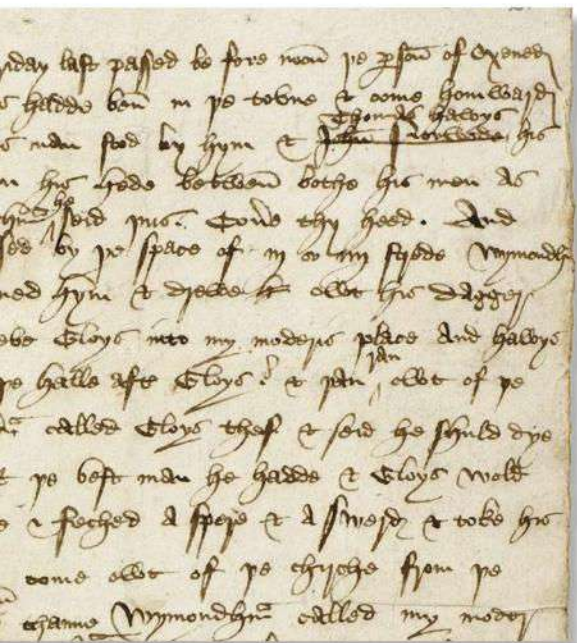
And if the messenger arrived at the wrong time, he was often in for a long wait. A man who carried a letter for William Stonor of Oxfordshire reported back that he had tried to deliver it, but that the recipient was not at home. He reassured Stonor that he would try again later: "John Cheyney is out hunting with his hawk, as soon as he comes home I will deliver your letter."

5 Bad news? Don't shoot the messenger

Sometimes a letter could send its recipient into a fit of rage. That's when it paid to select a messenger who was skilled in the art of conciliation

So the messenger has finally delivered your precious letter. Yet that didn't necessarily mean their work was done. Sometimes they were also tasked with delivering a verbal message. In other instances – especially if the recipient was offended by the contents of the letter – they might have to act as a diplomat.

In 1449, the Paston family had to use a female servant to convey a letter to a man who had forcibly taken possession of their manor, because no male servant was willing to take the risk. At a time of heightened tension, using a woman letter-bearer paid dividends. She was, we're told, received "with great cheer" and her spoken message was listened to graciously. Previous male messengers hadn't enjoyed such a warm reception.



swiping at a servant of the Pastons with his sword, slicing open his hand.

Margaret tells her husband that she's decided to send Gloys to work for him in London. Margaret adds that she has heard that Wyndham is also planning to travel to London. She warns her husband to beware, because Wyndham is "cursed in the heart" and is likely to attack him stealthily "like a thief", rather than directly "like a man".

6 Burn after reading

Some people insisted that letters be destroyed, while - luckily for us - others were obsessed with filing them away

Some 15th-century writers gave instructions that their letters should be burned after reading. Others put the most sensitive information at the foot of the page, intending it to be torn away and disposed of. Each of these methods was designed to restrict access to confidential information. However, the very survival of these letters shows that such commands were not always obeyed. It seems that medieval correspondents' desire to avoid written records was equalled by an obsession with keeping evidence.

Sir John Fastolf had a specially designed archive in the tower of Caister Castle, where his servants collected his letters and other documents. Just as today, designing a method for sorting and storing this material could be difficult. Fastolf's servants regularly had trouble finding written material once it had been put away. Even his own stepson complained that he could not find any of the records he needed, nor could "any man that he knew of".

However, despite the flaws in the organisational system, it protected the letters from loss or damage. It is this obsession with preserving written evidence that we have to thank for the survival of medieval letters today - letters that tell us so much about how people organised their lives during that fascinating period. **H**



A messenger delivers a letter in a medieval illustration. As 15th-century property-owners often had numerous homes - and regularly moved from one to another - tracking them down was no easy task

Deborah Thorpe is a post-doctoral intern at the University of York, working on a project looking at medieval scribes

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

► **Blood and Roses: The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century** by Helen Castor (Faber, 2005)

► **Masters of the Post: The Authorised History of the Royal Mail** by Duncan Campbell-Smith (Penguin, 2012)

ON THE PODCAST

Deborah Thorpe discusses letter-writing in medieval England on our weekly podcast

► historyextra.com/medieval-life



BODLEIAN LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD MS.
GOUGH GEN TOP 16

The map of medieval Britain



How did medieval Britons picture their own island? **Alixé Bovey** took a journey around the realm guided by a 14th-century map, and explains what it tells us, revealing some of the hidden gems she found along the way

Alixé Bovey is head of research at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. Her books on illuminated manuscripts include *Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts* (British Library Publishing Division, 2002)

Scotland looked a bit like a sock, according to the makers of the Gough Map, one of the most important maps made in the Middle Ages. But their depiction of the rest of the British Isles was remarkably accurate.

My excursions to the Middle Ages are normally undertaken in a library, but in 2007 I used this extraordinary map to make a series of journeys around medieval Britain for a BBC Four television series. At first glance the Gough Map is unassuming, hard to decipher, even baffling. It is faded and rubbed, stained in places, damaged here and there by damp, and sometimes illegible. Oriented towards the east, and with Scotland shown in the form of a misshapen foot, even Britain's outline is unfamiliar. But rotate the map 45 degrees and its contours become recognisable.

One of the earliest and by far the most accurate maps of Britain, small details reveal that it was probably made around 1360. The first stone of the wall that the map shows around Coventry was laid in 1355, so the map was probably made after this date; and as the town now called Queenborough is labelled 'Sheppey', it was probably made before 1366, when this name changed.

An astonishing amount of information is recorded in inscriptions and images. Settlements are marked by size: villages and small towns are indicated by simple houses or churches, while larger towns and cities have walls enclosing clusters of buildings. Seas, lakes, rivers, forests and mountain ranges are there. Notes indicate good hunting spots and warn that wolves roam the Scottish Highlands. There are even sites of pseudo-historical interest, like the spot off the coast of Dartmouth where, according to legend, Brutus (great-grandson of Aeneas) landed with the Trojans before founding London.

One of the map's most important features is the network of red lines linking places, with distances between marked in Roman numerals. Indeed, this is the earliest surviving British map that provides such detailed information, though it might not have been the first to do so – the Gough Map was probably copied from a now-lost map made c1290.

Given the resources needed to produce such maps, and the motivation required to do so, it's likely that both were made for royal patrons who would undoubtedly have strategic reasons. If the Gough Map's parent was made for King Edward I as he struggled to subjugate Wales and Scotland, then the Gough Map itself could have been produced for his grandson, Edward III.

Though the Gough Map is of limited value in navigating the motorways of modern Britain, its landmarks are reassuringly



“It’s likely that the map was made for a royal patron with strategic reasons for wanting such a tool”

familiar. Its forests, rivers, castles, great cathedrals and parish churches remain important features of the modern landscape, and Hadrian's Wall – described as *murus pictorum*, ‘the wall of the Picts’ – stretches from Tynemouth to Solway Firth. Ancient woods are marked on the map, including Sherwood Forest, symbolised on the map by a pair of twisting tree trunks. By the time the mapmakers drew this symbol, the giant tree known as the ‘Major Oak’, which still stands at the heart of Sherwood, was already a substantial specimen; according to one

tradition, Robin Hood and his merry band used this tree as a hideout. This legend cloaks a darker reality: outlaws did seek refuge in Britain's forests, but they were not exactly bold advocates for redistributive economics. Dangerous, sometimes even murderous, they posed a major threat to medieval travellers.

By the time the Gough Map was made, Wales had been under English rule for some 80 years, but the two routes plotted through it (one curving around the north coast to Aberystwyth, the other cutting through south Wales from Hereford to St David's) were both used by Edward I in his campaigns between 1277 and 1284. By contrast, no journeys are described through Scotland, which had successfully resisted decades of English aggression. This is undoubtedly why the map's account of Scotland is so patchy: while the mapmakers could have drawn on informed sources, and even personal knowledge, for England and Wales, their picture of Scotland relied more on unverified tradition and hearsay obscured by generations of antagonism.

Take
a closer
look

The map under the microscope

Five things the Gough Map tells us about medieval Britain

• Croydon

• Reigate

• Dorking

• Kingston

• Brentford

• Cobham

• Guildford

• Colnbrook

1 Most (but not all) roads lead to London

London gets top billing in the Gough Map, befitting its position as England's capital city. With its name written in gold, it is shown with a crenelated gate and a cluster of towers and gabled roofs, the largest of which must be old St Paul's. Croydon and Barnet, both now absorbed by London's sprawl, are marked as villages. The capital is a hub for a number of major routes terminating at St Ives, Bristol, St David's and Carlisle. Yet the number of routes marking journeys through Lincolnshire and Yorkshire demonstrates that all roads did not lead to London in the 14th century.

Turn the page for four more close-ups of the Gough Map

The Gough Map: how, who, where?

► How was the map surveyed?

This is one of the hardest questions to answer about the map. It seems that the mapmakers used the measured routes to serve as a framework around which other information could be assembled. The accuracy of the depiction of the coastline suggests that navigational charts might have represented important sources, too.

► Who was Gough, and why is this 'his' map?

Richard Gough (1735–1809) was an antiquary who devoted

himself to writing about British history, monuments, customs and topography. He avidly collected books and manuscripts in his areas of interest, and purchased the Gough Map at an auction in 1774 for a half-crown (worth about £72 today). Gough bequeathed his collection of maps and charts to the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

► How useful is it as a resource for historians?

The Gough Map is a vital source of information about medieval British geography, providing us

with a snapshot of places and routes in the decade between c1355 and 1366. Because it is so accurate, it reveals much about the skill of English cartographers in this period. It also reveals something of the mentality of its makers, who projected onto it a wide range of interests, from good hunting spots to places of legendary interest.

► Where is it now?

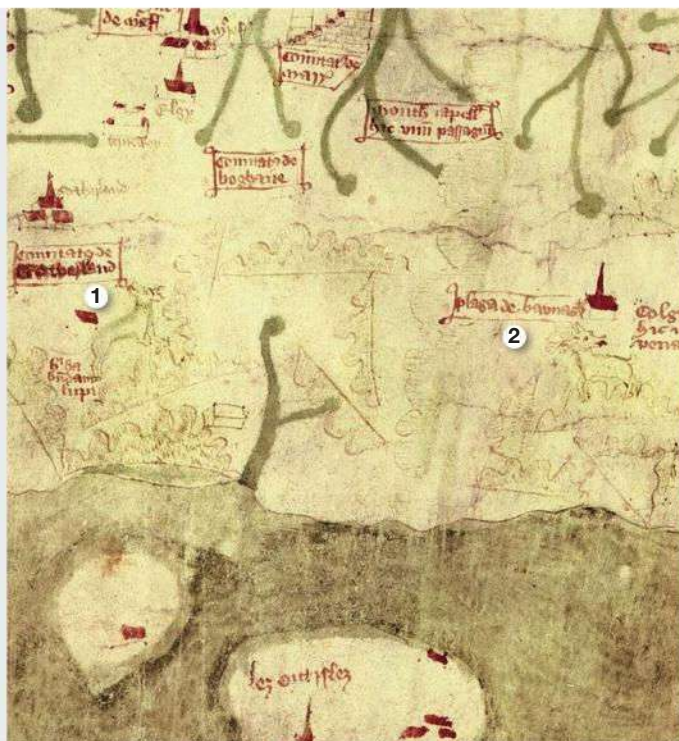
The Gough Map is still held in the Bodleian Library, where it is part of the library's extensive collection of early maps and charts.

A sketch of Richard Gough, who in 1774 bought the map that bears his name for a half-crown



3 Scotland is home to wolves and weird fish

The mapmakers' knowledge of Scotland seems to owe more to rumour than to the cutting-edge cartography in evidence elsewhere on the map. In the absence of accurate information on Scotland, some aspects of its description on the map show a rather romantic view of this mysterious land. Loch Tay is described as a place of marvels, inhabited by fish without intestines, and a note next to a red deer says "great hunting here". **1** A sketch of a wolf in the Highlands is accompanied by a legend warning "here dwell wolves". **2**



4 A giant-slaying hero founded London

Despite damage to the map, an inscription on a cartouche near Dartmouth is legible: "*hic Brutus applicuit cum Troinaiis*" (Here landed Brutus with the Trojans). Writing in the 12th century, Geoffrey of Monmouth described how "The island of Britain... was uninhabited except for a few giants." According to Geoffrey, the adventurer Brutus, great-grandson of the heroic Aeneas of Troy, defeated the giants, founded London as a New Troy, and established the lineage of British kings. Such legends appealed to the genealogical vanity of Plantagenet kings; in 1299 Edward I used Geoffrey's tale to justify his claim to Scotland in a letter to the pope.

2 York was an economic hub

Like London, York is written in gold on the Gough Map, emphasising its economic and political importance. The map also clearly shows routes running from Cardigan to Chester, Droitwich to Doncaster, and Boston to Spalding. However, the vital route between London and Dover simply isn't there, and there are no routes extending into Scotland (unsurprisingly, given the enmity between the two nations at this time). Meanwhile, the two Welsh routes cling to the northern and southern edges of the country. Clearly this map wasn't designed to describe all of the major thoroughfares in Britain, but the rationale for the routes that are on the map is puzzling. Perhaps the mapmakers only chose to include roads that they believed were measured accurately.



5 The northern seas are full of peril

One of the most enigmatic elements of the map is an image of a shipwreck near Orkney, its mast snapped and its rigging trailing in the water. It has been suggested that the image might represent the story of Margaret, 'the Fair Maid of Norway', granddaughter of Alexander III of Scotland. Margaret, who was to assume the Scottish throne, fell ill on the voyage from Norway and died on Orkney, but rumours circulated that her ship had been wrecked. This twist in fate thwarted Edward I's plan to marry his son to Margaret, thereby securing Scotland for the Plantagenet dynasty. If so, and if the Gough Map was made for Edward III, this image would be a reminder of a missed opportunity.

RESEARCH

New images of an enigma

The Gough Map is currently the subject of groundbreaking research at Oxford's Bodleian Library, combining three innovative analytical techniques.

"The Gough Map is such an enigma," said the new project's principal investigator, Catherine Delano-Smith. "We don't have the information we need to say for sure when this remarkable document was created, by whom and why, so the priority here is to give what we hope will be a definitive description, including a date, and the history of how it was altered and updated."

First, a 3D scanner creates a detailed 'relief map' of the document's surface by passing a laser across the map and filming it from each side with a video camera. The resulting image shows tiny marks and evidence of stretching or reworking, and can reveal ghostly indentations left by a scribe's pen.

Hyperspectral imaging uses a beam of white light composed of bands of coloured, near-infrared and ultraviolet light to produce a high-resolution digital 'map' of the inks or materials used to create the artefact. Using different colour combinations highlights features that are invisible to the naked eye, revealing details unseen for centuries. These include place names and features that have been deliberately erased, amended or painted over, or that have flaked off or worn away.

The final technique, Raman microscopy, uses the scatter of light from a laser to pinpoint the unique chemical signature of the different pigments used on the map. This gives detailed information about the pigments' molecular make-up, which can be used to identify them and to help date the original artefact and any later revisions.

Critically, the work is non-invasive and can be undertaken on-site, meaning that there is very little risk of damage to the map.

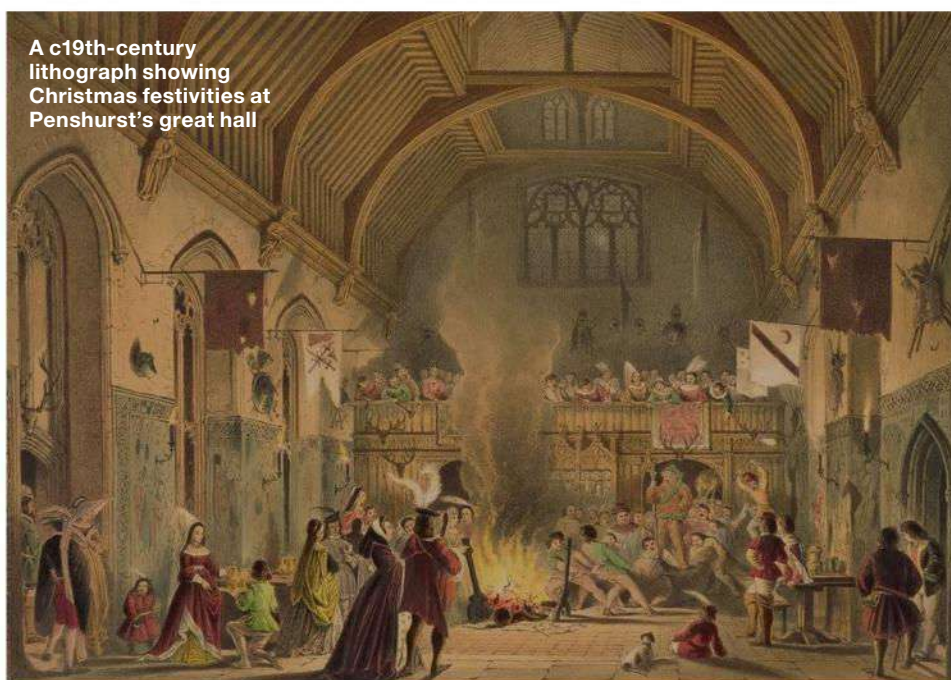
By Vanessa Collingridge, historian and presenter

"Imaging using different colour combinations can highlight features that are invisible to the naked eye"



Medieval highlights

On her journey around the country with the Gough Map as her guide, **Alixé Bovey** encountered some extraordinary treasures. Here she explains what they tell us about Britain during the Middle Ages



A c19th-century lithograph showing Christmas festivities at Penshurst's great hall

Penshurst's great hall

Between 1341 and his demise during the Black Death in 1349, Sir John Pulteney, a wealthy merchant and sometime mayor of London, constructed a great hall for Penshurst, his manor house in Kent. Known as the Baron's Hall, this vast space is the best-preserved 14th-century great hall in England. Its soaring chestnut roof, spanning 12 metres (39ft), is supported by 10 corbels carved in the form of servants whose faces grimace under the weight of the beams above them.

Undoubtedly, Pulteney intended this hall to serve as a place to conduct the estate's business, for dining and for entertaining. It was lit by expansive windows with modish tracery based on London models, and heated by a single fire in the centre of the room – in winter his guests would have had to dress in their warmest furs.



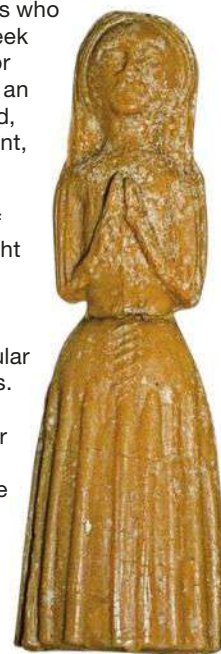
Penshurst manor encompasses England's best-preserved 14th-century great hall

The wax votives of Exeter Cathedral

In 1943, Exeter Cathedral was struck by the bombs of Hitler's Luftwaffe. As the damage was cleared up, workmen made an extraordinary discovery. Hidden above the tomb of Edmund Lacy, bishop of Exeter from 1420 to his death in 1455, they found a hoard of figures made of beeswax. There were body parts of humans and animals, and a complete female figure. Many of these fragile, hollow objects had strings attached to them, which must have been used to hang the figures from the tomb.

These objects, known as votives, were left as offerings by pilgrims who came to Lacy's tomb to seek a cure – for themselves, for someone else, or even for an animal. Lacy was regarded, briefly and locally, as a saint, but he was never officially recognised as such. Lacy suffered from a disease of the shin bones, which might explain the large number of legs in the collection: pilgrims probably hoped that he would have particular sympathy with injured legs. These fragile votives are exceedingly rare, and offer us a glimpse of popular devotion in England before the Reformation.

One of the many wax votives that were left at Exeter Cathedral by medieval pilgrims



ALIXÉ BOVEY/BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/ALAMY

A ship at Newport

In 2002, the remains of a medieval sailing ship were discovered in the muddy banks of the river Usk at Newport. This fantastically rare find promises to tell historians a great deal about trade in the period before the *Mary Rose*. Built sometime after 1445, possibly in France, and repaired with British timber felled in the mid-1460s, the ship must have sailed into port through the Bristol Channel and Severn Estuary – an important shipping route in the Middle Ages, clearly depicted on the Gough Map.

Well preserved by the mud of the Usk, this substantial ship, 35m (nearly 115ft) long, was excavated and moved to a warehouse where its dismantled timbers were kept in large tanks before beginning a freeze drying process. Made of oak with a beech keel, it reveals much about shipbuilding in the 15th century. Artefacts found on board include cannon shot, a comb and a magnificent pointed shoe; Portuguese pottery and coins indicate trade links with Iberia.



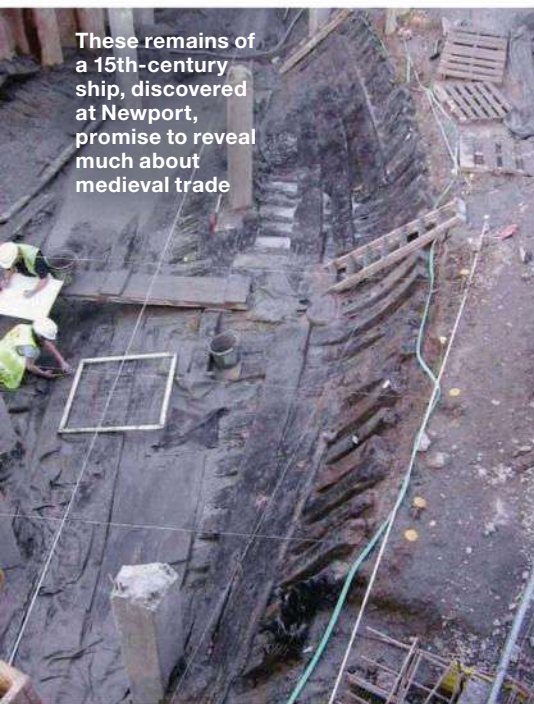
Edward II's alabaster effigy at Gloucester Cathedral

Edward II's tomb, Gloucester Cathedral

Edward II's tomb at Gloucester Cathedral commemorates one of England's most unsuccessful medieval kings. By the time Edward died in 1327, he was notorious – deposed by his wife and her lover, in disgrace because of his misrule, and probably murdered. His tomb, which took a decade to construct, displays virtuoso craftsmanship. Edward's effigy, the first major English figure to be carved in alabaster, is enclosed in a delicate cage of micro-architecture complete with finely carved buttresses, pinnacles and crockets.

The effigy itself is a fascinating combination of masterful naturalism and elegant symbolism. His face is idealised but astonishingly lifelike, with a gently furrowed brow, flared nostrils and parted lips, but this verisimilitude is in contrast to his smoothly coiffed hair and beard, each lock defined by parallel grooves. Details were once picked out in gold leaf and paint, and his crown was studded with fake gemstones. Despite Edward's divisive reign, pilgrims flocked to pray at his tomb; some even campaigned to have him recognised as a saint.

These remains of a 15th-century ship, discovered at Newport, promise to reveal much about medieval trade



The monsters of Canterbury Cathedral

Carved into stone capitals of the columns of Canterbury Cathedral's atmospherically gloomy crypt are images of fiends, monsters and roaring lions. Some peer menacingly at passers-by, while others fight with one another, hand to hand or armed with weapons. On a column in the St Gabriel chapel, monstrous hybrids play a silent serenade on pipes and stringed instruments. On one capital face, a winged creature with canine paws and long rabbit ears plays a harp, accompanied by a wolf playing a pipe.

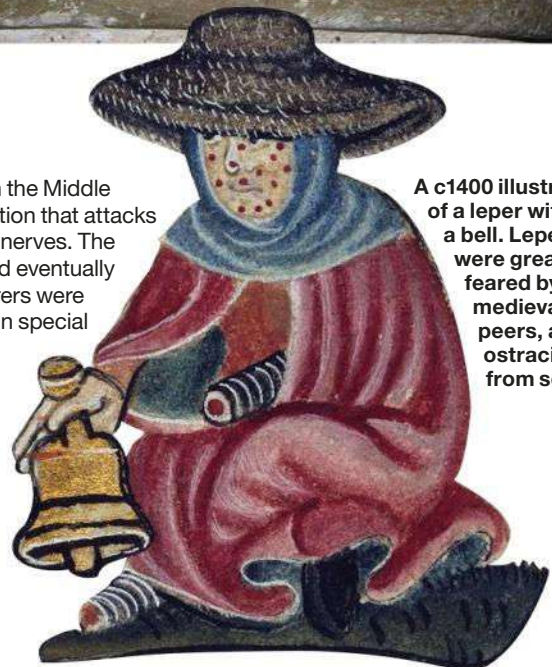
What are these bizarre images doing in the sacred space of one of Britain's most impressive cathedrals? Some may relate to the Bible. For example, the female figure with two wolfish heads that rides on a twisting monster could be the Whore of Babylon described in the Book of Revelation. Others, like the animal musicians, could be a response to ancient writings that revelled in absurdity, or reminders of vice and temptation. Ultimately enigmatic, they are a monument to the skill and imagination of artists working in Canterbury c1100.



Just two of the monstrous hybrids that adorn the columns of Canterbury Cathedral

Leper skeletons from Chichester

One of the most feared diseases in the Middle Ages was leprosy, a bacterial infection that attacks the skin, mucous membranes and nerves. The disease was painful, disfiguring and eventually fatal. To compound matters, sufferers were ostracised from society, cared for in special homes known as leprosaria; one such, dedicated to St James and St Mary Magdalene, was founded in Chichester in 1118. Its cemetery was excavated in the 1980s and 1990s, the bones now stored at the University of Bradford's Biological Anthropology Research Centre. They illustrate the ravages of this infection, which causes a shocking remodelling of bones, especially the limbs and head. **H**



A c1400 illustration of a leper with a bell. Lepers were greatly feared by their medieval peers, and ostracised from society

DEATH, DISEASE & DA



ENGER

With threats from the Black Death, leprosy, crime and poverty lurking everywhere, life for medieval people could be brutal and short

The Black Death

Exploring UK locations with notable links to past events can help us to understand wider historical topics. John Hatcher visits the Suffolk village of **Walsham le Willows**, which lost half of its population to bubonic plague in 1349

Walsham le Willows is a picture-postcard village, heavily sprinkled with historic thatched and half-timbered houses, set deep in the west Suffolk countryside some 14 miles from Bury St Edmunds. The meandering stream that runs along the main street, the medieval church of St Mary the Virgin set in a spacious, tree-shaded churchyard, its highways and byways, greens and fields – all exude a settled peacefulness and a certain definable Englishness. So it is all the more shocking to learn that in the mid-14th century villages like this all over the British Isles were ravaged by a disease from Asia that killed one in two of their inhabitants in just over two months.

The Great Pestilence, or Black Death as it later became known, took little more than seven years to wipe out around half of the human race. It spread outwards in 1345 from the High Steppes of east Asia, scything a massive arc of unimaginable ferocity south-west to the Middle East, the Mediterranean and north Africa, and then another arc north and west that encompassed the whole of Europe from southern Spain to northern Norway, from the west coast of Ireland to eastern Russia, before finally fizzling out in 1352, close to where it had begun.

Although modern historians tend to be more scientific and cautious in assessing the scale of catastrophes in the past than medieval chroniclers were, the mortality caused by the Black Death is an exception: in recent decades, the death toll of the epidemic has been progressively raised, not lowered.

The disease's spread was devastatingly

rapid, and the death rate incredibly high. So high in fact that, despite the abundance and persuasiveness of contemporary descriptions of its unique symptoms – especially the grossly swollen and extremely painful lymph glands known as buboes – increasing numbers of medical scientists, epidemiologists and historians began to doubt that it could have been bubonic plague. (Bubonic plague is caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* and was thought to rely for its transmission on the bites of infected fleas carried on the backs of rats.) So a host of alternatives were suggested, including anthrax and typhus, and the case was made that such devastation could only have been caused by a virus, perhaps ebola, or even by an unknown pathogen from outer space delivered on a comet.

In the past decade, however, ongoing research, utilising a combination of DNA analysis and antigen-based Rapid Diagnostic Testing on skeletons buried in more than 50 Black Death cemeteries across Europe, has confirmed *Yersinia pestis* as the causative agent of the epidemic plague that devastated Europe in the Middle Ages.

Walsham le Willows contributes valuable information about the behaviour of plague thanks to the outstanding quality of its surviving documents. All tenants who died are listed in the detailed and continuous records of the courts of the lords of two manors in the village, so we can see that plague began killing residents in early April and had run its course by early June. By then, 109 of the original tenants were dead, many buried in communal graves.

There were approximately 176 tenants on the two manors just before the plague

John Hatcher examines the Walsham Manor court roll for 15 June 1349. Additional vellum had to be sewn to accommodate the names of the 109 tenants who had died of plague

Photography by Bruce Head

BRUCE HEAD

A photograph of Professor John Hatcher, an older man with glasses, wearing a blue shirt and a dark blue blazer. He is sitting at a wooden table in a library, surrounded by tall bookshelves filled with books. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. In front of him on the table are several large, unrolled medieval manuscripts with handwritten text in dark ink. The lighting is warm and focused on the professor and the manuscripts.

“The Black Death
took little more than
seven years to wipe
out around half of
the human race”

PROFESSOR JOHN HATCHER



struck, which means the death rate in the village was likely to have been around 60 per cent. In fact, during the court of Walsham Manor held on 15 June 1349, so many deaths had to be recorded, along with the details of the lands the victims held and the heirs who were in line to inherit them, that the clerk had to sew an extra membrane of vellum to accommodate all the information.

But Walsham's experience was not unique; the impact of the epidemic was dramatic and felt immediately. More than 300 years of population growth had left most of early 14th-century Europe overcrowded, but the massive mortality of the Black Death meant that in an instant people became relatively scarce, and land and employment abundant. Thus the balance of power between landlords and tenants, and between employers and workers, shifted dramatically.

"ORDINARY PEOPLE WERE DETERMINED TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE OPPORTUNITIES PRESENTED BY THE NEW WORLD THAT EMERGED"

Despite the attempts of the elites to thwart change and hang on to privileges, ordinary people were determined to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the new world that emerged in the wake of the plague. The system of serfdom began to wither, rents fell, vacant tenancies proliferated, wages rose and the position of many women improved. Once again these broad changes can be traced in the records of Walsham. In the courts

A stone decoration in Walsham's church. Religion played an important role in the lives of villagers during times of strife



BRUCE HEAD

“IMPROVED INCOMES AND LIVING CONDITIONS WERE BOUGHT AT THE HIGH COST OF SHORT LIVES AND THE UNTIMELY LOSS OF LOVED ONES”

Professor John Hatcher in Walsham le Willows' parish church of St Mary the Virgin. "The death rate in the village was likely to have been around 60 per cent," says Hatcher



The ornate font at St Mary's Church dates back to the 14th century

held immediately after the plague, a large number of previously landless folk inherited land, often from distant kin, though a good number of heirs refused to take up their inheritances – presumably because the land was too poor, too expensive or overburdened with servile obligations.

Signs of trouble ahead for lords were also evident at harvest-time the following year, when a large number of tenants did not turn up to perform their obligatory labour services on the lord's farm.

However, some lands remained in strong demand, like the rich freeholds of the prosperous Cranmer family that descended to two sisters, Olivia and Hilary, when three generations of males were wiped out within the space of a few weeks. The Cranmer sisters went on to make a success of their unexpected good fortune and built up large herds of

cattle and flocks of sheep to supply the rising demand for meat, dairy produce and wool, as the increased incomes enjoyed by the survivors of the plague enabled them to eat more, and better, food and spend more on clothing. Manor records also detail a surge in the number of marriages as survivors sought new companions and helpers on their smallholdings to replace their dead spouses.

A further succession of virulent plagues from 1361–62 quashed any hopes landlords had of a speedy reversal of the changes the Black Death had set in train. For most people, improved incomes and living conditions were bought at the high cost of short lives and the untimely loss of loved ones to recurring outbreaks of plague. Yet, unimaginably ferocious as the Great Pestilence was, and unprecedentedly massive its impact on society and economy, there was

no collapse into chaos; disorder and discord were surprisingly well contained.

Today, 'medieval' is often used to signify lawlessness, violence and anarchy but there are lessons to be learned from the ability of our distant ancestors not only to survive what was perhaps the greatest natural disaster ever, but to get life back to a good measure of normality and effective governance on a national as well as village level. **H**

John Hatcher is emeritus professor of history at Cambridge University, and author of *The Black Death: The Intimate Story of a Village in Crisis, 1345–1350* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009)

ON THE PODCAST

► John Hatcher discusses the Black Death on our podcast [historyextra.com/medieval-life](https://www.historyextra.com/medieval-life)

THE BLACK DEATH FIVE MORE PLACES TO EXPLORE



Walsham le Willows



Walsham le Willows, Suffolk
● walsham-le-willows.org

1 Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

● corpus.cam.ac.uk

Corpus Christi College was founded by city guilds in 1352. The prime duties of its two fellows and six chaplain scholars were to sing masses for the souls of the guildsmen and women who had perished of plague, to provide spiritual services for the surviving members and to train new priests to replace those who had died. The Old Court, built in the mid-1350s, is the oldest surviving court in Cambridge.



Old Court, Cambridge's oldest surviving court

4 St Francis's Abbey, Kilkenny, Ireland

● kilkenny.ie

This abbey is famous because one of its friars, John Clynn, wrote the most informative and moving account of the pestilence in Ireland, recording how it stripped towns and villages of their inhabitants so thoroughly that there was scarcely anyone left alive in them. So great were the numbers of deaths in the region and in his own abbey that Clynn wrote that he has left parchment "in case anyone should be alive in the future and any son of Adam can escape this pestilence and continue the work thus begun". A later hand added: "Here it seems the author died."

The abbey was founded in the 1230s. Decaying after the dissolution, its ruins now stand within the grounds of a brewery.

2 St George's Church, Trotton, West Sussex

● trotton.org.uk

The waves of plague that struck in the later 14th century left people terrified of dying suddenly with a great stain of sin on their souls. The vivid c1390 wall painting in St George's Church depicts Christ sitting on the Day of Judgment with the naked soul of Spiritual Man being welcomed into heaven by one angel, while Carnal Man is rejected by another. Roundels picturing the Seven Works of Mercy and the Seven Deadly Sins also feature.

3 Weymouth, Dorset

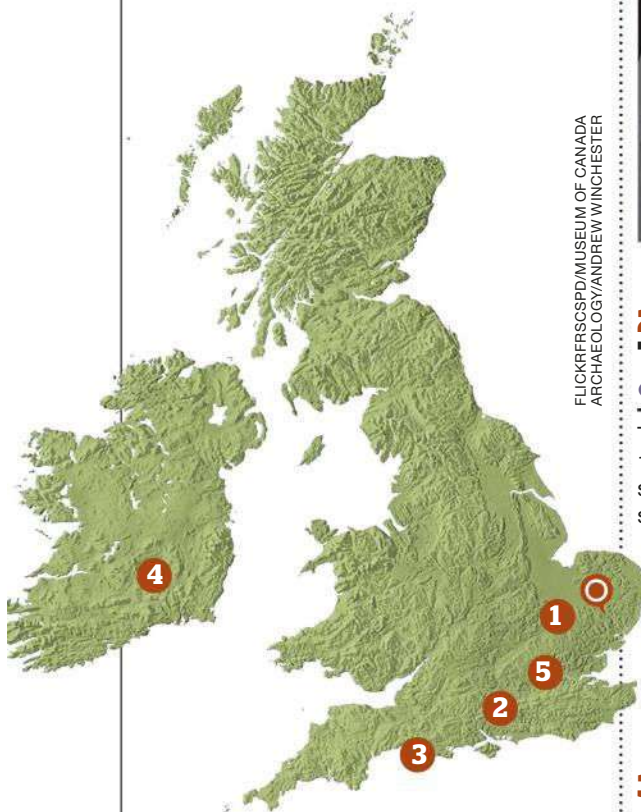
● visitweymouth.co.uk

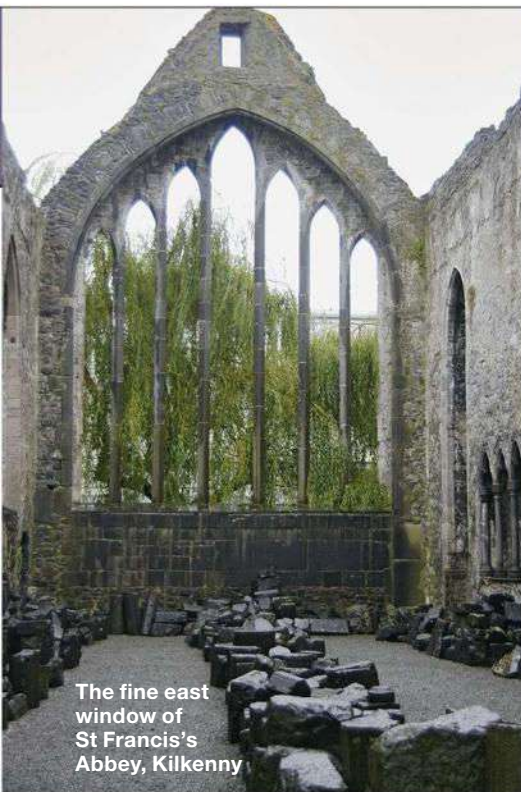
In the Middle Ages the seaside town of Weymouth enjoyed a modest prosperity by exporting wool and cloth and importing wine. In late June/early July 1348, the bacillus that caused the plague arrived along with the casks of wine from Bordeaux. Today, a plaque (left) in the harbour commemorates the town as the first place in England to become infected with the Black Death.



The Seven Works of Mercy form part of a larger medieval wall painting at St George's Church in Trotton, West Sussex

FLICKR/FRSCSPD/MUSEUM OF CANADA ARCHAEOLOGY/ANDREW WINCHESTER





The fine east window of St Francis's Abbey, Kilkenny



Skeletons unearthed in a plague pit in East Smithfield cemetery, London

5 Museum of London

● museumoflondon.org.uk

So huge was the scale of deaths when the Black Death struck London in November 1348 that many additional cemeteries had to be hastily consecrated. As well as proving that the disease they died from was bubonic plague, tissue taken from skeletons buried in pits in the new East Smithfield cemetery has enabled the

genome of the bacterium that caused the plague to be reconstructed. Surprisingly, it has proved to be remarkably similar to strains found in parts of the world today. The Museum of London has many exhibits relating to the plague in London and archaeological work carried out in East Smithfield cemetery.



A woodcut from 1485 showing the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, who was later venerated as the patron saint of lepers. Biblical stories shaped medieval attitudes to leprosy

Leprosy: a 15th-century diagnosis

Carole Rawcliffe argues that doctors showed remarkable sophistication when diagnosing and treating one of medieval Europe's most dreaded diseases

In the summer of 1468 Joanna Nightingale, of Brentford in Middlesex, awaited with trepidation the outcome of her petition to the chancellor of England. Suitors to the Court of Chancery often had good cause for anxiety, because it dealt with last-ditch appeals, but Joanna's situation was particularly desperate. She had been declared a leper, probably by a local jury composed of her near neighbours, and faced the unwelcome prospect of compulsory retirement to a solitary place in the country, away from the rest of the community.

In accordance with a ruling in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, suspected lepers were customarily required to live 'outside the camp' throughout medieval Europe, either in special hospitals, of which there were more than 300 in England, or in less formal settlements. If the sufferer was wealthy, it would be possible for them to withdraw to sequestered private quarters out of the public eye. However, since this requirement arose

from the desire to avoid ritual pollution rather than from any fear of infection, segregation was in practice far from absolute. Admission to hospital was, for example, entirely voluntary, being best suited to those who wished to follow a religious life.

Connections between the sick and the healthy remained close. It was common to encounter groups of lepers seeking alms at the gates and even in the markets of towns and cities, and many went on pilgrimage to popular shrines in the hope of a miraculous

cure. Because Christ had consorted with the leprous (and had even come to resemble a victim of the disease after he was badly beaten by the Roman soldiers using metal-tipped scourges), particular merit seemed to be attached to caring for lepers, either in person or through the provision of material support.

Objects of fear

As Joanna discovered, though, attitudes had grown far less tolerant during the previous century. This was partly due to the dissemination in the west of works on medical theory and practice, which brought the writings of ancient Greek and Muslim physicians to a wide audience. As a result, new ideas about the transmission of disease from one person to another by noxious vapours or miasmas began to take hold.

The Black Death of 1348–50 and subsequent outbreaks of plague at frequent intervals greatly intensified emergent anxieties about infection. In an age before antibiotics, sufferers from degenerative skin

“Because **Christ had consorted with the leprous**, particular merit seemed to attach itself to caring for them”

Why leprosy acquired such a stigma



A medieval surgeon examines a patient for morphew – blisters caused by scurvy, easily confused with leprosy

Known today as Hansen's disease (after the Norwegian physician who in 1873 discovered the mycobacterium that causes it), leprosy is still endemic in many parts of the world.

It was renamed in the 1940s in order to remove some of the appalling prejudice surrounding the word 'leper', much of which arose in the 19th and early 20th centuries rather than the Middle Ages.

Medieval men and women, who did not have access to microscopes, defined leprosy in various different ways that changed over



conditions such as leprosy not only appeared physically disturbing but were also believed to generate their own miasmas, making them objects of fear as much as compassion.

Joanna's refusal to leave home consequently provoked a sharp official reaction in the shape of a writ to the sheriff of Middlesex, ordering him to assemble a group of local experts in order to determine the nature of her disease and, if necessary, to effect her speedy removal.

Fearing a repeat of her first brush with authority, Joanna took pre-emptive action. It was then that she petitioned the chancellor, who arranged for a formal judicium, or examination, at Westminster conducted by three of Edward IV's most distinguished medical advisors.

Their report, which was composed in Latin, the language of the university-educated physician, is of particular interest – not least because, in contrast with those from continental Europe, very few such documents survive from late medieval England. It reflects a remarkably sophisticated approach to diagnosis, great emphasis being placed upon the

importance of 'scientific process' and 'medical science' as a means of rational investigation.

Medieval medicine is still all too often regarded as lurking in a murky and superstitious interlude between the shining beacons of the ancient Greeks and the Renaissance. Responses to leprosy tend to evoke the most lurid generalisations about ignorance and brutality. Yet the two royal physicians and the surgeon who examined Joanna in 1468 demonstrated a meticulous and systematic approach to the challenge of diagnosing a disease whose symptoms were notoriously perplexing.

Infallible signs

Because of the serious consequences of a positive verdict, late medieval practitioners, such as the French surgeon Guy de Chauliac, advocated a cautious approach. If necessary, they might even recall the suspect for several separate examinations over a long period to see how potentially alarming symptoms might have developed.

Many authors also recommended the use of

a checklist covering all or most of the 40-odd *signa infallibilia*, or unequivocal symptoms, with one column for positive findings and another for negative. Only when the former significantly outnumbered the latter was it justifiable to conclude the worst.

Matters proved straightforward in Joanna's case. The professional experts confined themselves to checking 25 of the more common 'proofs' and, after a thorough examination, were soon persuaded that she was free of the disease. As a further precaution, and no doubt to reassure her neighbours, they covered a further 40 'secondary tokens' relating to the four different sub-types of leprosy then recognised by physicians. Once again she appeared to be "utterly free and untainted", and left the court a happy woman with written proof of her discharge.

What were the experts looking for? Many of the items on their checklist would strike a modern specialist as very familiar. Collapse of the nasal cartilage; hoarseness of voice; respiratory problems; protuberant nodules on

the centuries, along with the terminology used to describe it. We should not, therefore, fall into the trap of assuming that all – or even most – medieval ‘lepers’ had Hansen’s disease, though palaeopathology (the study of skeletal remains) confirms that many did.

It is easy to see why people became confused, because the ‘lepers’ of the Old Testament were suffering from *sāra’ath*, a word that embraces a wide range of relatively benign dermatological conditions. When the Bible was translated into Latin, *lepra*, which in the early Middle Ages likewise denoted a number of ill-defined skin problems – including eczema, psoriasis and scabies – seemed the most appropriate match. At this stage, then, a ‘leper’ was anyone with badly ulcerated or damaged skin.

The translators who had to tackle the medical texts in Arabic that reached southern Europe in the 11th and 12th centuries faced more of a problem, since they had to find an equivalent for *judhām*, a terminal disease with devastating symptoms that the ancient Greeks had called elephantiasis and that more closely

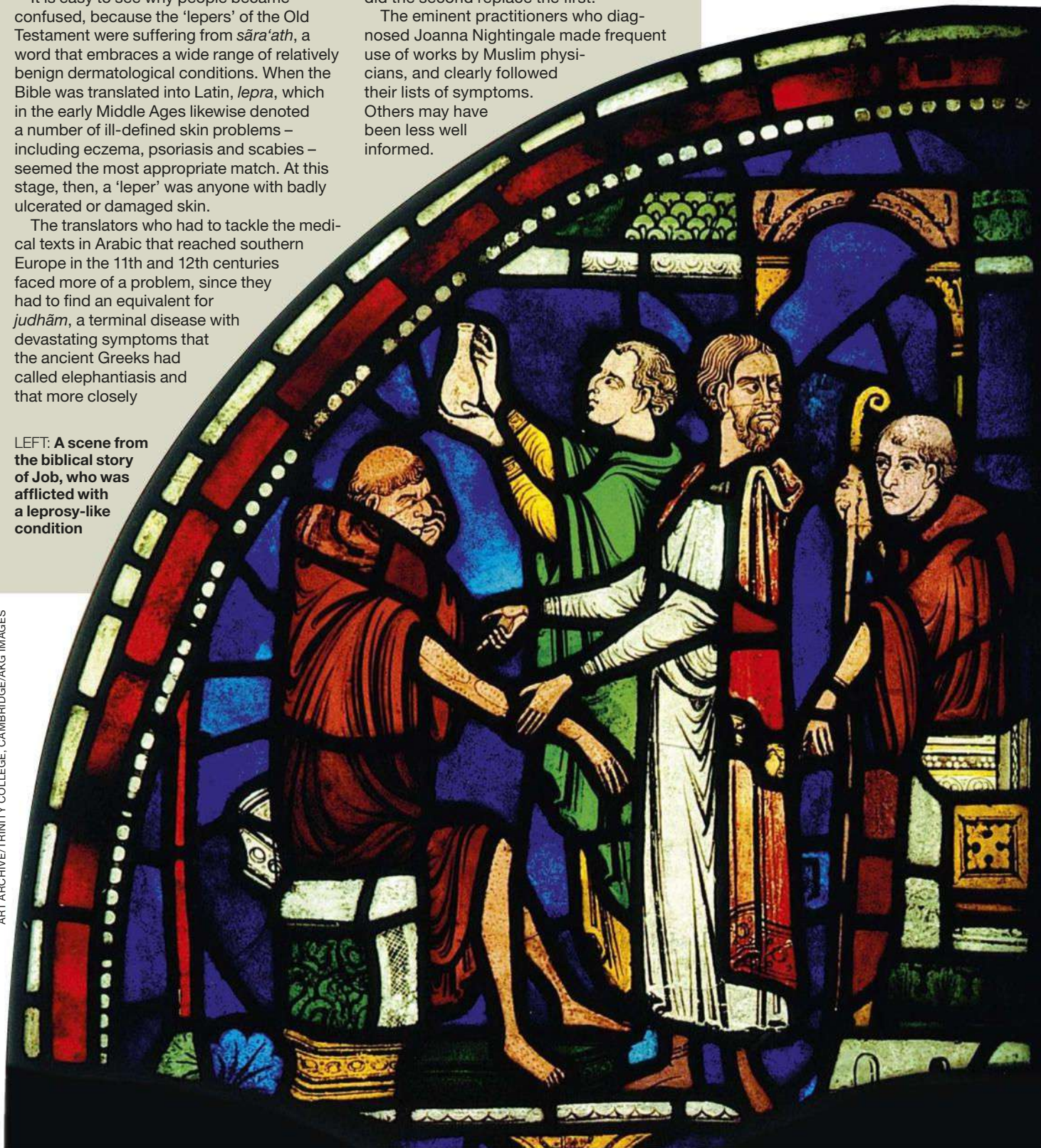
resembles our own notions of leprosy.

Mistakenly, they opted for the ‘umbrella’ word *lepra*, which thus gradually began to acquire a more specific and terrible meaning. But for many years the two definitions co-existed, and only gradually did the second replace the first.

The eminent practitioners who diagnosed Joanna Nightingale made frequent use of works by Muslim physicians, and clearly followed their lists of symptoms. Others may have been less well informed.

This c1215 stained-glass panel in Canterbury Cathedral shows doctors examining a leper’s urine sample

LEFT: A scene from the biblical story of Job, who was afflicted with a leprosy-like condition



The French surgeon Guy de Chauliac, who is depicted in this 14th-century illustration, provided advice about the diagnosis of leprosy



“Medieval medicine is all too often regarded as a murky interlude between the beacons of the ancient Greeks and the Renaissance”

the face and body; ulcerated lips, eyes, gums and ears; fetid breath; coldness, prickling and lack of sensitivity in the extremities; attendant damage to fingers and toes; ‘clawed’ hands and feet; hair loss and discolouration of the skin... together, they present an amalgam of symptoms to be found in any 21st-century medical textbook. It would, however, be misleading to assume that late medieval practitioners envisaged disease in the way we do today, with all the advantages of laboratory-based technology.

A number of the tests employed in 1468 sought to discover if there had been any significant loss of equilibrium between the

elements of heat, cold, moisture and dryness within Joanna’s body. At that time it was believed that an imbalance of this kind caused sickness, and would be especially apparent in a condition as serious as leprosy. Evidence might be found through a careful scrutiny of blood and urine, a reading of the pulse and an assessment of the suspect’s state of mind.

Anyone faced with the prospect of a terminal and disfiguring disease might justifiably feel depressed, anxious and persecuted, but these feelings also seemed to reflect the dry, cold and melancholic nature of what some medieval physicians described

as “a cancer of the whole body”. It was therefore customary to assess the individual’s state of mind, and even to analyse his or her dreams, which might well be appropriately dark and disturbing. Since it was also believed that leprosy could develop in a vulnerable individual as a result of poor diet, unfavourable environmental factors, dirty living conditions, heredity and protracted exposure to people with leprosy, Joanna would have been asked detailed questions about her lifestyle.

Had she been a man, more intimate inquiries about sexual activity might have revealed previous relationships with women, and especially prostitutes, who consorted with lepers but themselves appeared unblemished. A conviction that in some circumstances leprosy could be sexually transmitted inevitably coloured attitudes to the disease, though it is important to stress that medical practitioners were urged to behave compassionately at all times and to avoid making moral judgments.

The final, significant question is: how knowledgeable might Joanna’s first accusers have been? From the 14th century onwards, local courts were expected to report any suspect lepers who posed a risk to communal health. Though there was a predictable tendency to single out the more undesirable members of society on the basis of a few suspicious sores or ulcers, we cannot necessarily assume that juries always acted out of blind prejudice and ignorance.

A growing demand for information about health care and the avoidance of pestilence created a ready market for accessible guides in English, and minor officials often acquired a good basic grasp of medicine in the course of their duties. But they still tended to focus upon a narrow range of symptoms, much to the frustration of those qualified practitioners who sought to establish more precise and accurate criteria for assessment.

In this respect, the case of Joanna Nightingale provides an illuminating insight into the struggle being waged by an emergent medical profession to set itself apart from the unlearned and untrained in terms of knowledge and expertise. **III**

Carole Rawcliffe is professor of medieval history at the University of East Anglia

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

► **Leprosy in Medieval England** by Carole Rawcliffe (Boydell Press, 2009)

► **Leprosy in Premodern Medicine: A Malady of the Whole Body** by Luke Demaitre (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007)

By historical standards, London today is a clean city. Effluent drains through sewers, domestic waste is collected, most people shower daily. But that certainly wasn't the case in the Middle Ages. **Dan Snow** reveals medieval London's stinkiest stinks

Dan Snow was talking to Jonathan Wright

Sniffing out the past

Dan cleans out a cesspit, a process otherwise known as 'gong farming'

BBC

“Given the perfume rich people wore, it’s fair to assume that **slummy areas were pretty stinking**”

The people

The population would have absolutely stunk. They did not wash very often. They often didn’t have more than one set of clothes. There was very little idea of personal sanitation, and in the summer they would all have been hot and sweaty.

The only source of water for washing was the river – and we know that gong farmers, people who emptied the latrines, would have gone and washed there. But of course the river was also the receptacle for all the mess. We think people would have avoided washing in the winter. After a period of warmer weather, from about the 10th to the 13th centuries, it got quite cool again and sometimes the Thames would have been frozen for weeks on end, so there would have been limited opportunities to bathe there. I think you’d probably avoid bathing in the river if it was cold.

Given how much perfume the richer people wore, I think it’s fair to assume that some of the slummy areas, the overcrowded areas, were pretty stinking, partly thanks to the inhabitants. Nonetheless, our information is that people did regard washing as rather effete. Bathing just wasn’t that regular – it’s a total inversion of our modern obsession with daily washing.

The latrines

Wealthy families would have had private latrines in the back garden, and obviously those had to be cleaned out, by gong farmers or muckrakers. Otherwise, latrines were communal. One man called Richard the Raker famously drowned in one of these cesspits [around 1326].

Gong farmers and muckrakers were well paid. They would come in at night and shovel the waste out, using carts to carry it away. There’s no way of controlling the smell but you could try to keep on top of it by emptying the cesspits. As you can imagine, if there was torrential rain they’d overflow and just join the mess in the streets.

Thanks to the Books of Assizes, which contain records of complaints by neighbours, we know about two dodgy plumbers who built a toilet over the street with an overhang so that the waste would just drop down into the street. We also know about a woman who used guttering to carry away her waste. Her neighbours complained because when it rained their gutters became full of her excrement.

“After torrential rain, the cesspits would **overflow** and just join the mess in the streets”

Simple glazed chamber pots were common in the 17th century



The streets

The sewers and the streets were virtually indistinguishable. There really wasn’t much of a sewerage system; there would just be gutters running down the edge of some streets and, indeed, ditches that were dug down the middle of the street with a slight camber on them, as well.

The streets were the receptacles for all waste. There were chamber pots being emptied into them. There were the entrails of slaughtered animals, the dead cats, the dogs. Barber-surgeons were obsessed by letting blood, and that would have been drained off in the street, as well. We know that in the summer, when the rain didn’t come, the streets would have just been piled high with the detritus of the city.

The street would have been so disgusting that the people wore pattens. These were worn over a normal shoe and were effectively wooden clogs, raising you off the ground. They would elevate you above the human effluent and the mess that was in the streets.

‘Pattens’ comes from patt, meaning animal hoof. In fact, the guild for shoemakers in Britain is still called the Worshipful Company of Pattenmakers. They made me a pair and I attempted to walk around on fish entrails, cow poo, mud and stuff – it was great fun.

DREAMTIME

The Thames

The river was basically the only means of getting sewage, certainly liquid waste, out of the city. The river was the way they got drinking water but also where they dumped all their waste. No wonder the fish died – it would have been absolutely foul.

The off-cuts, the various bits of offal, things that weren’t going to be eaten from the butchers, these were wheeled down to the Thames and dumped off a specially constructed pier in an attempt to put them in the middle of the river, the fastest-flowing part. Corpses would have been knocking about in the river, too.

Dick Whittington built public privies over the river, suspended on wooden piles, where you could go and excrete straight into the water. It was seen as a handy way to get rid of human waste.

One advantage that London had over Paris is that at least the river is very tidal, so there is relatively fresh water coming in twice a day – it’s acting as a huge flushing system for London. The Seine is not tidal – it’s very placid, gently flowing – so it would have been absolutely filthy.



The Thames wasn’t a healthy place for fish. **RIGHT: Sewage, offal, even corpses polluted the river’s waters**




Tanneries

Tanning was an incredibly important process. It turns animal hides into leather, which is obviously hugely useful. I went through the tanning process and it was a totally rancid thing to do.

There are huge amounts of waste products at every stage. There's alkali run-off from the initial process of soaking the hides. There's the urine and dog poo that you use to treat the hides. You have to separate the subcutaneous fat from the animal skin with a big knife, to shave all the residual fat off the hide. That is basically a waste product.

Tanning was an absolutely foul process, which stank and also created chemical compounds sometimes that were actually very, very dangerous – they'd burn your mouth.

The authorities tried to regulate where the tanneries and the slaughterhouses could be. As the medieval period went on, there was an attempt to regulate London more. For example, there were only three places where butchery was allowed in the city of London.

I helped slaughter a pig to see how much waste it produces. It was pretty unpleasant. We took a full bladder of urine out – there's not a huge amount you can do with that. 

BBC

Dan Snow is a historian and broadcaster



Dan Snow guts a pig the medieval way in a slaughterhouse

8

DANGERS of the medieval period

Katharine Olson reveals eight of the biggest threats facing medieval people – from famines and deadly diseases to hunting accidents and street brawls

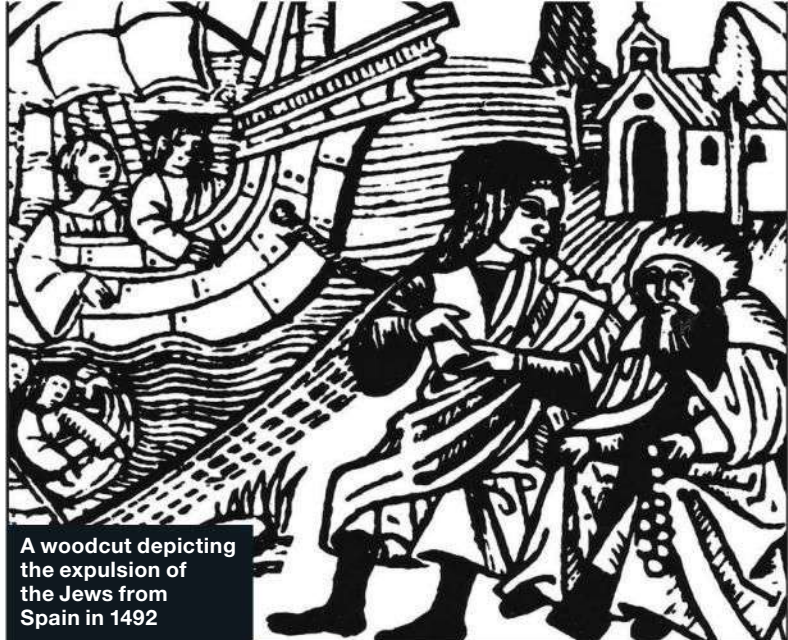
1 Bad weather

Consistently poor weather could lead to problems sowing and growing crops, and wet, cold summers could destroy cereals – the main food source for most of the (mainly rural) population. This caused grain shortages and inflation, leading to hunger, disease and higher death rates. The icepack grew from c1300 onwards; by 1550, glaciers had expanded worldwide, and people faced wetter, colder weather. Medieval people were thus eager to ensure favourable weather conditions.

In Europe, there were rituals for ploughing, sowing seeds and harvesting, as well as prayers, charms, services and processions to ensure good weather and fertility. Saints were thought to protect against frost (St Servais), or have power over wind (St Clement), rain and droughts (St Elias/Elijah).



A Cistercian monk harvests grains in a 12th-century illumination



A woodcut depicting the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492

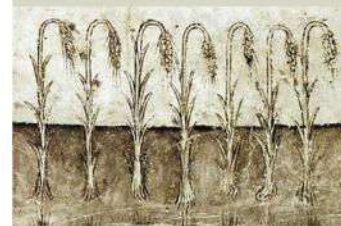
2 Heresy

People who held opinions contrary to the teachings of the Christian church were seen as heretics. In England, anti-Semitism led to massacres of Jews in York and London in the late 12th century, and in 1290 Edward I banished all Jews – who were permitted to return only in the 17th century.

Elsewhere, Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, and Muslims allowed to stay only if they converted to Christianity. Holy wars were also waged on Christian 'heretics'. The Albigensian Crusade attacked the Cathars (chiefly in southern France) from 1209, and massacres followed in the 13th and 14th centuries.

3 Famine

After bad weather and poor harvests, those who survived often scraped by on meagre rations: bark, berries, inferior corn and wheat damaged by mildew. Malnutrition left many vulnerable to disease, and epidemics often followed. Between 1315 and 1322, western Europe saw brutally cold winters and heavy rainfall for up to 150 days at a time. What poor crops did grow were often mildewed or terribly expensive; bread, the main staple, was scarce. At least 10 per cent of people in England died in this 'Great Famine'.



Long spells of heavy rain could cause crop failure and famine

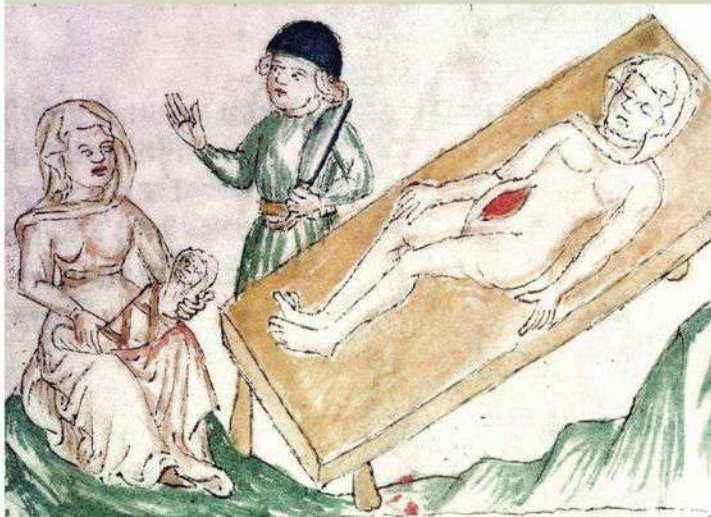
4 Childhood

Scholars have estimated that 20–30 per cent of children under seven died, being particularly vulnerable to malnutrition and diseases – smallpox, whooping cough, measles, tuberculosis, plague, influenza and bowel or stomach infections. Being born into a wealthy family did not guarantee a long life, either. In ducal families in England between 1330 and 1479, one third of children died before the age of five.

5 Childbirth

Breech presentation of the baby could prove fatal for mother and child. Labour could last several days; some women died of exhaustion. Caesarean sections were rare unless the mother was already dead or dying – and were not always successful. Midwives (most with no formal training) usually attended births

and would perform emergency baptisms on babies in danger of dying. New mothers could die from postnatal infections and complications, including, in 1537, Jane Seymour, third wife of Henry VIII, who died soon after giving birth to the future Edward VI.



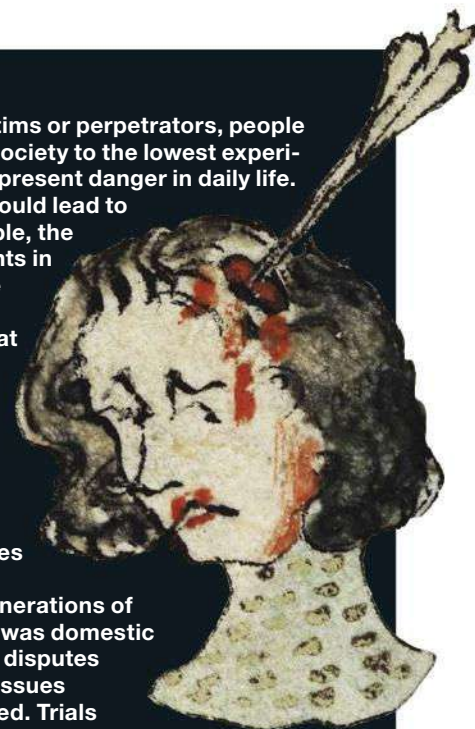
An illustration from c1420 shows a swaddled baby delivered by caesarean section – from a mother who had already died

6 Violence

Whether as witnesses, victims or perpetrators, people from the highest ranks of society to the lowest experienced violence as an omnipresent danger in daily life.

Urban and rural unrest could lead to large uprisings – for example, the lengthy rebellion of peasants in Flanders of 1323-28, or the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in England. Records show that rape, assault and murder were not uncommon. Nor was accidental homicide. Maud Fris, for example, was hit on the head and killed by a large stone dropped on her head at Montgomery Castle in Wales in 1288.

Blood feuds involving generations of families were common, as was domestic violence. Local or regional disputes over land, money or other issues could also lead to bloodshed. Trials were at times decided by combat ordeals (duels to the death). In Wales, political or dynastic rivals might be blinded, killed or castrated by noblemen to consolidate their positions.



Blood pours from an arrow wound to the head in this 14th-century illustration

7 Hunting

Hunting was an important pastime for royalty and the aristocracy. William the Conqueror, for example, established royal forests where he could indulge in his love of the hunt. But hunting was not without risks.

A hunter could easily be injured or killed in an accident. He might fall from his horse, be pierced by an arrow, be mauled by the horns of stags or tusks of boars, or attacked by bears.

Even monarchs weren't immune to the dangers of hunting. The Byzantine emperor Basil I died in 886 after apparently having his belt caught on the horns of a stag; he was reportedly dragged over 15 miles before being freed.

In 1100, King William I (William Rufus) was famously killed by an arrow in a supposed hunting accident in the New Forest. Likewise, in 1143, King Fulk of Jerusalem died in a hunting accident at Acre, when his horse stumbled and his head was crushed by his saddle.

Hunting was a seriously perilous occupation – as this 14th-century illumination, depicting the death of William II, proves



8 Early death

Sudden or premature death was a common occurrence in the medieval period. Adults died from a variety of causes, including plague, tuberculosis, malnutrition, famine, warfare and sweating sickness, as well as infections.

Most people died young, but death rates varied based on factors such as status, wealth, location (death rates were higher in urban settlements), and possibly gender. Wealth, though, did not guarantee a long life, and well-fed monks did not necessarily live as long as some peasants.

The average life expectancy for ducal families in England between 1330 and 1479 was only 24 years for men and 33 for women. In Florence, laypeople in the late 1420s could expect to live only 28.5 years (men) and 29.5 years (women). **H**

Dr Katharine Olson is a lecturer in medieval and early modern history at Bangor University

Around 3,000 villages and towns were abandoned during the medieval period. **Christopher Dyer** visits eight related sites to find out what caused such an exodus

The villages that disappeared

Even during a recession we expect towns and villages to expand. New housing estates are, after all, part of modern life. It is rather depressing, and even shocking, to see dilapidated houses in towns or ruined farmhouses in the country.

Yet in earlier centuries, roofless buildings, grass-covered streets and redundant houses were commonplace. We could take the story back to the decay of Roman cities and villas in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, or the abandonment of the farms founded to replace them in the countryside of the Anglo-Saxon period. This article, however, focuses

on thousands of hamlets and villages – and a handful of towns – that were deserted from around 1300 until recent times, but which have left traces of their existence in the modern landscape. Many of them can still be visited.

By the year 1100, concentrations of houses and people in villages comprising between 12 and 50 dwellings had developed in the Midlands, the north-east and central southern England, parts of eastern Scotland and south Wales. However, elsewhere in Britain most people lived in hamlets or scattered farms.

Villages thrived through the cultivation of grain in large open fields, and generally grew in size until about 1300. They began to run

into trouble when the population shrank in the 14th century, which meant that less grain was required and could then be sold only at low prices. These problems were exacerbated when the peasant cultivators tried to adjust their farming by raising more animals, leading to disputes with neighbours over grazing land. As a result, families moved out and heirs did not take over their parents' holdings of land. Sometimes the balance tipped completely in favour of pasture, and the cultivators became redundant.

As a consequence, from around 1380 until the early 16th century, many villages were either deserted or shrank significantly. Sometimes the problem came from within,



A grassed-over house and enclosure at Hafod y Nant Criafolen in Clwyd. It's thought that herdsmen occupied this settlement during summer in the 15th and 16th centuries before abandoning it for good in the 1600s.

as ambitious peasants took over their neighbours' land or drove hundreds of sheep over the common fields, and newcomers were discouraged from moving in.

These developments made communities quarrelsome and fractious. Worse still, they often doomed them to failure. Sometimes the lord of the village or their agents – such as the farmers who managed the lord's own share of the village fields – killed off the village by expanding their own flocks and herds, forcing tenants out or buying up land. In many cases, after a period of decay, the landlord removed the remaining vestiges of a once-thriving community in order to profit from the wool and meat that could be reared on the site.

The problems of outward migration, land being concentrated in fewer hands and lords pursuing higher profits continued to afflict villages well into the 17th century. Then, in the 18th century, villages came under attack from a different source: the owners of stately homes. The gentry were often blamed for removing villages that 'spoiled the view' when creating their landscape parks. However, the villages they removed were often in poor health by the time this landscaping was taking place.

Villages weren't the only settlements to disappear from the landscape. Hamlets and farmsteads were also abandoned – but for different reasons. Those on high ground were

blighted by poor weather, while those engaged in managing pastures were no longer needed when the pastures were permanently settled or when grazing was reorganised.

Occasionally, even sizeable towns were consigned to history. Dunwich in Suffolk was washed away by the waves; others were damaged in wars. Yet there was usually some underlying economic problem, such as shifts in trade, that weakened larger settlements and made them vulnerable to accidents of environment and politics.

Plagues, weather and wars have all – often without justification – been blamed for destroying Britain's villages. Some people claim that the changing climate or soil exhaustion made the land uninhabitable, but these are only likely to have been decisive factors in extreme environments such as high moorlands. Disease rarely killed everyone in a village, and many settlements abandoned by 1450 were still flourishing in 1380, 30 years after the Black Death. Wars rarely caused damage that could not be repaired.

So what remains of these deserted villages? Occasionally, a ruined building marks the site. Yet these are usually part of a castle, manor house or church, which would have been the only stone structures in the village. A typical peasant house may have had a low, stone foundation wall, but was built mainly of timber and wattle and daub with a thatched roof that either decayed or was carried away to be recycled when the village was abandoned.

Yet all is not lost. The sites of houses are usually visible as grassed-over foundations or platforms on which the building stood. You can sometimes see roads and lanes as sunken hollow ways, while the boundaries of the enclosures (tofts) in which the houses stood are sometimes marked by banks and ditches.

Once a village had gone, the lord often built a mansion on or near the site. It is in the fields surrounding these mansions that you can sometimes identify the grassed-over banks and hollows of walkways, flower beds and water features which formed part of the garden that occupied the site of the village. Look closely and you might see the prospect mounds (from which visitors could view the garden) or the pillow mounds built to house rabbit warrens.

Christopher Dyer is emeritus professor of history at the University of Leicester and co-editor of *Deserted Villages Revisited* (University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010)



1 Brenig Valley, Clwyd

2 Gelligaer Common, Glamorgan

3 Godwick, Titteshall parish, Norfolk

4 Quarrendon, Buckinghamshire

5 Hound Tor, Devon

6 New Winchelsea, Sussex

7 Glenochar, South Lanarkshire

8 Wharram Percy, North Yorkshire

1 Brenig Valley CLWYD

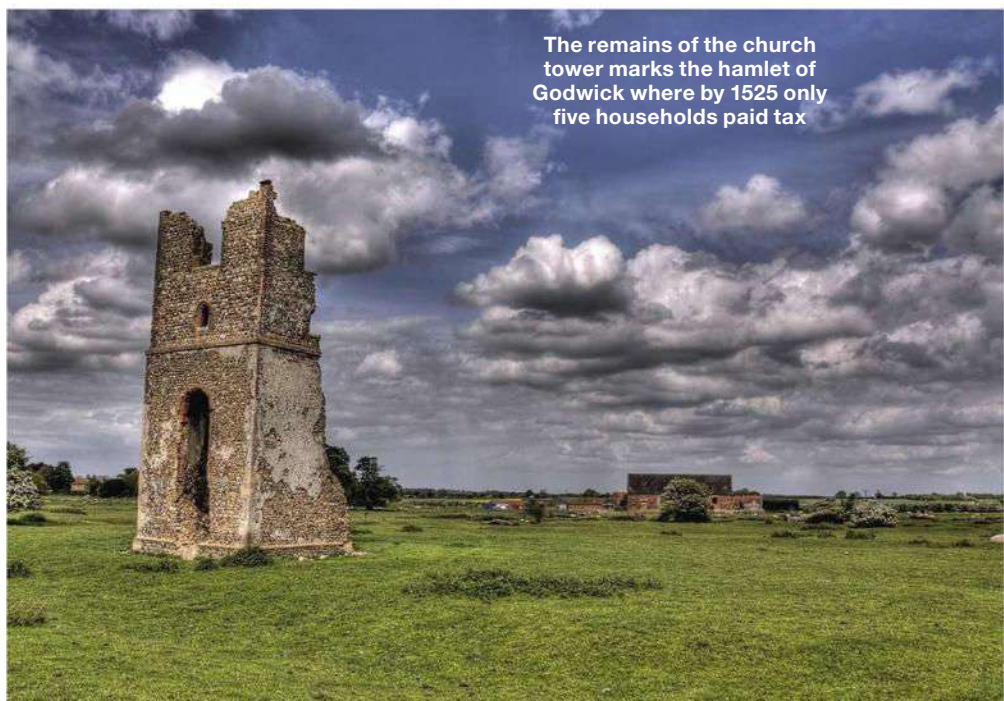
Where herdsmen and dairywomen lived in summer pastures

We don't know what this settlement was called, but its modern name is Hafod y Nant Criafolen. *Hafod* refers to a seasonal settlement, home to herdsmen who moved in the summer from permanent homes in the valley to look after their livestock. The site originally lay at the edge of an area of pasture, and consisted of seven houses with enclosures of irregular shape attached. Finds from the excavations of these houses showed that they were occupied in the 15th and 16th centuries, but also revealed something of life on the summer pastures. Spindle whorls were used to weight distaffs when spinning woollen yarn in preparation for cloth making, but the main task for the women living here would have been milking cows and ewes, and making butter and cheese. Men rode about the hills, judging from the horse-shoes and spurs that were found. This hafod was probably abandoned when farming was reorganised in the 17th century. Later sources from Ireland tell us of the pleasures of life on the hills when young dairywomen and herdsmen were freed from the restrictions and conventions of life in the valley. Finds from Brenig included pieces of a sword and a pistol, a reminder of the insecurities of living on a remote hillside.

► cpat.org.uk/projects/longer/histland/hiraeth/mhsettle.htm



Brenig Valley hosted a seasonal settlement for tending livestock



The remains of the church tower marks the hamlet of Godwick where by 1525 only five households paid tax

2 Gelligaer Common GLAMORGAN

Where peasants tended cattle and sheep from terraced hillsides

This piece of open moorland at a height of 400 metres is surrounded by the industrial and post-industrial landscape of the south Wales coalfield. Six 13th-century houses lay in a row on a shelf of land on the edge of the moor, overlooking the valley through which the small river of the Bargoed-Rhymney runs.

Each house was built on a relatively level platform created by digging into the slope at the higher end and

piling the earth excavated at the lower end. Each dwelling was about 15–20 metres long, built with a low stone foundation wall and a framework of timber. When some of the houses were excavated in the 1930s, hearths were found in the middle of the floors.

So was this a permanent settlement? Metalworking was undertaken here, suggesting that it was more than a summer camp, but its most likely use would

have been as a *hafod* (seasonal settlement).

The houses were abandoned soon after 1300, judging by the pottery excavated in and around them. This may have been the result of the deteriorating climate, or perhaps the peasants were impoverished by the huge fines levied on them after a rebellion against the English lords of Caerphilly Castle in 1314.

► <http://bit.ly/1BPk8al>



Six herdsmen's houses were perched on a shelf of land at the edge of Gelligaer Common

ROGER MARKS/PHOTOLIBRARY

3 Godwick NORFOLK

Where the church tower of an East Anglian hamlet still proudly stands

The striking feature of this site in the parish of Titteshall is the ruin of the tower, rebuilt soon after the church fell down in 1600. A long, hollow way defines the village street, with banks and ditches defining the closes in which houses stood. These well-preserved earthworks are not often seen in Norfolk, mainly because so many sites have been ploughed up in modern times.

The long street, however, shows that the elongated plan – the one-street village – was established in East Anglia as well as in other parts of the country. Another recurring feature is the early modern

garden visible around the existing house, with a deep hollow way and a series of rectangular enclosures. This reflects the effects of the wealthy landowner on the landscape after the village had gone.

Godwick was always a small place; 14 peasants were recorded in Domesday Book in 1086. It paid a modest amount of tax in 1334, but only five households paid tax in 1525 when the village was, in reality, already ceasing to exist.

☎ 01362 869282

► heritage.norfolk.gov.uk

4 Quarrendon

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

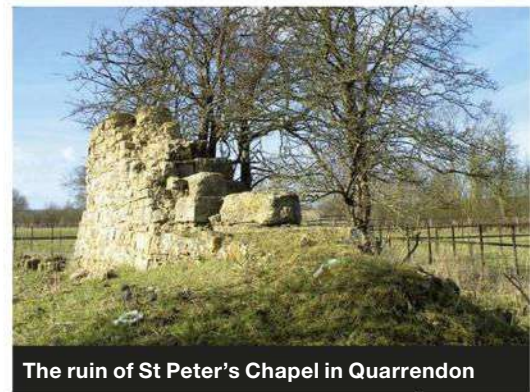
Where twin villages met

Quarrendon was sited on the low-lying clays of Buckinghamshire, good land for pasturing animals and growing crops. The peasants here lived chiefly by growing grain in open fields. This is, in some ways, typical of the deserted villages found in Midland counties. It was large, with at least 300 inhabitants by around 1330, and its 60 houses were grouped closely together.

Unusually, this actually comprised a pair of settlements a quarter of a mile apart, their remains still discernible in the modern grassland. The irregular shape of the settlements suggests that they were not deliberately planned. Roads (now marked by sunken hollow ways) met at a centre, perhaps a small green, surrounded by clusters of platforms and small enclosures or yards. The houses were built from timber and wattle and daub, with low stone foundations. Fragments of the stone-built church can still be seen lying between the two settlements.

The number of families here declined after 1350, and fell rapidly in the 16th century; only four remained in 1563. The land was taken over by the Lee family, butchers who bought land and became commercially minded landed gentry. They built a house with an elaborate garden, which occupies the space between the two village sites.

On the western site, paddocks can be seen where cattle were kept after the desertion. On the other site are pillow mounds: man-made rabbit warrens, symbolic of a leisured style of life. The farming village was replaced by a landscape designed for aristocratic pleasure and prestige.



The ruin of St Peter's Chapel in Quarrendon

☎ 01296 330559

► visitbuckinghamshire.org

5 Hound Tor DEVON

Where the wilds of Dartmoor were turned into cornfields – for a time

On the slopes of Dartmoor, surrounded by bracken, lie the granite foundations of 11 buildings including houses, barns and bakehouses with kilns and ovens.

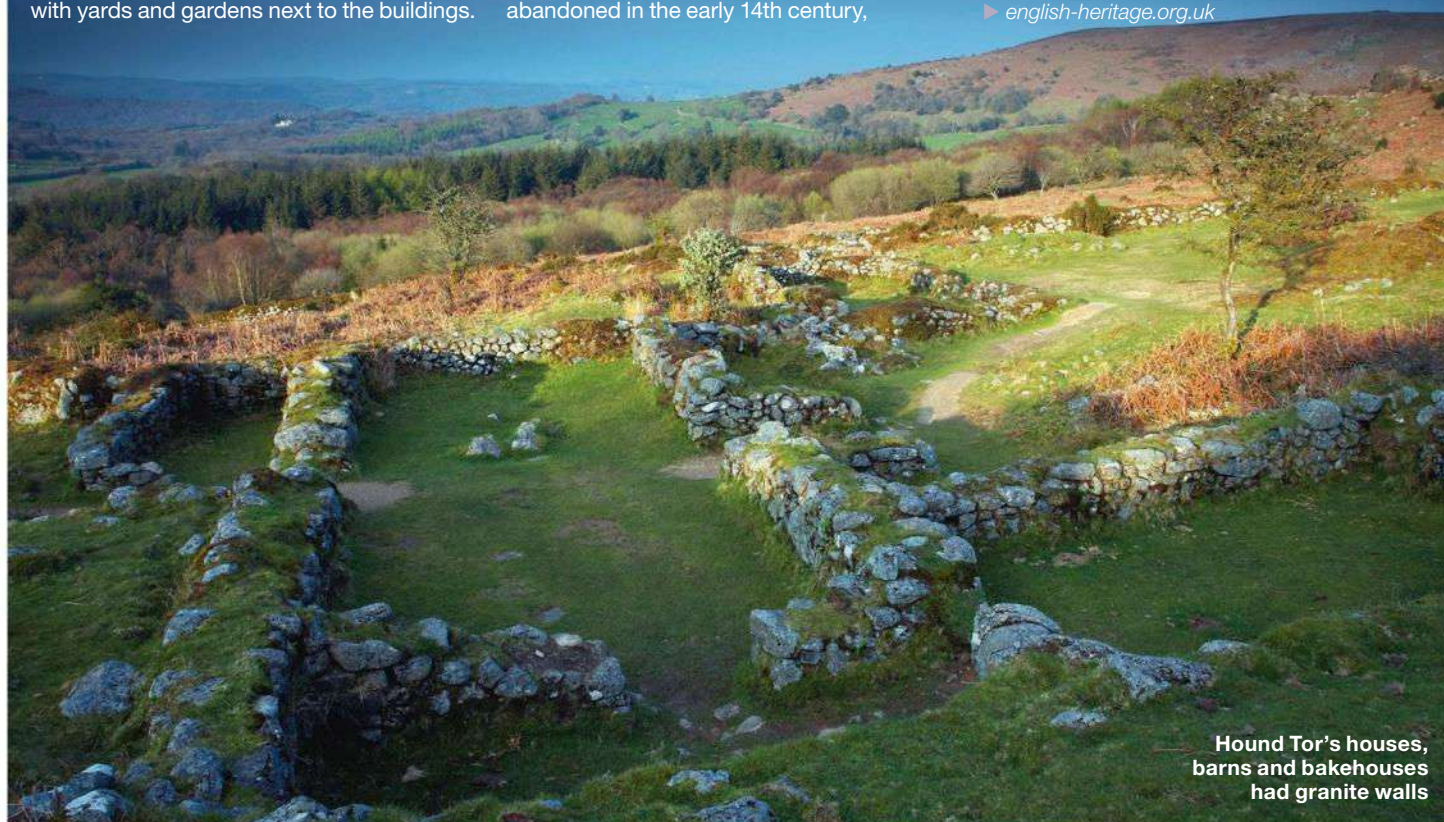
The hamlet was probably founded around AD 1000 as a shieling – a summer settlement for herdsmen. Houses for permanent occupation were added in the 13th century, with yards and gardens next to the buildings.

Its people cultivated part of the moorland – traces of ploughed fields can still be seen.

The house foundations have survived so well that doorways and internal partition walls that divided the hall (the room where people ate and socialised) from the chamber (for sleeping and storage) can still be seen. It was once thought that the hamlet was abandoned in the early 14th century,

perhaps because of deteriorating climate. It's now believed that the peasants left in the late 14th century, following the Black Death – not killed by the plague, but taking advantage of the fall in the population to move to more hospitable places in the valley.

☎ 0117 9750 700
▶ english-heritage.org.uk



Hound Tor's houses, barns and bakehouses had granite walls

ALAMY/WWW.WINCHELSEA.NET

6 New Winchelsea SUSSEX

Where the sea flooded the old port then abandoned its successor

The coastline of the English Channel on the Sussex/Kent border was unstable, and the port of Old Winchelsea was being destroyed by flooding when, between 1283 and 1288, Edward I founded a new town to accommodate the displaced population. He set about the task systematically, buying land that had belonged to the hamlet of Iham and laying out a grid of streets, set at right angles, before surveying lines of house plots.

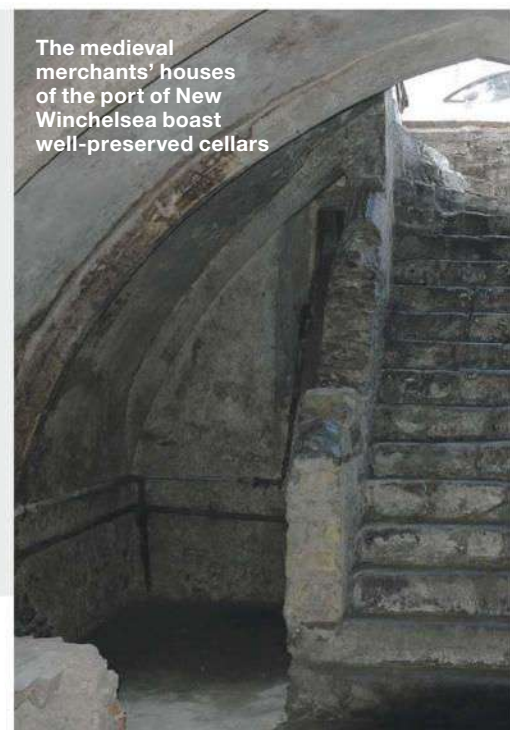
Old Winchelsea had been a sizable town, and its successor was assigned 802 plots, enough for a population of 5,000. The town did quite well out of the wine trade, fishing, and wood and timber from the Sussex Weald,

but it was raided by the French, the estuary eventually silted and the sea retreated.

Today's visitors can see gates and part of the town's walls. The church, once very big, has been reduced in size; around it sit the remaining houses. Some of these buildings, on the sites of the original merchants' houses, have medieval cellars underneath. Most of the south and west parts of the old town are now fields, and the footpath towards the New Gate is an old sunken way, with building stone and roofing tiles clearly visible on either side.

☎ 01797 225333
▶ winchelsea.net

The medieval merchants' houses of the port of New Winchelsea boast well-preserved cellars





7 Glenochar

SOUTH LANARKSHIRE

Where mystery surrounds the desertion of a border hamlet

Over this 17th-century site stands the ruined remains of a bastle, a characteristic domestic and defensive building of the Scottish borders, and a 'ferm town', a hamlet for peasant cultivators. The two-storey bastle was built as a precaution against raiding parties from northern England or other parts of Scotland. Often, cattle were kept on the ground floor while the family lived on the upper storey.

The bastle's builders were wealthy enough to afford a substantial house, and had property worth protecting. Around this structure were six single-storey peasant houses, with accommodation for people at one end and animals at the other. The houses were attached to small yards, and the peasants grew crops and pastured animals nearby. They were not hopelessly poor, and were in contact with a wider world, as finds from excavations – coins, tobacco pipes and pottery made in Staffordshire – show. The settlement was abandoned soon after 1700 – but we do not know why.

► biggararchaeology.org.uk/rp_bastlehouse.shtml

BIGGAR ARCHAEOLOGY/PHOTOLIBRARY/ALAMY



8 Wharram Percy NORTH YORKSHIRE

Where a church grew with the village before falling into ruin

Wharram Percy, perhaps the best-known English deserted village, took 40 years to excavate. Visitors to the village see the ruined church first, sitting in a steep-sided valley near some unoccupied Victorian terraced cottages and a pond. In the 19th century a single farmhouse stood here, farming land that once provided a living for 40 peasant families.

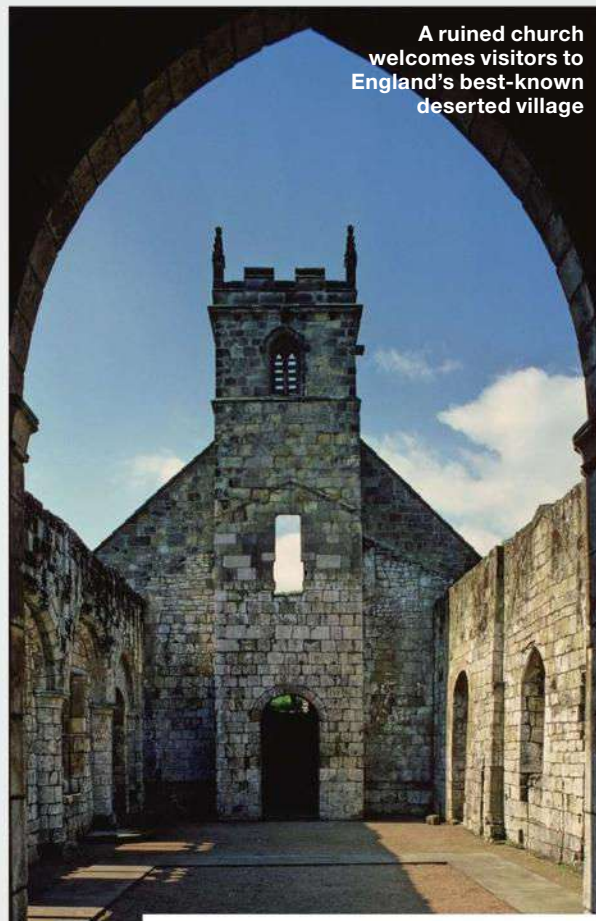
On the plateau above the valley are rows of small rectangular enclosures, about 40 in all, containing house sites, sometimes still with visible foundation walls. The walls of the manor houses and farm buildings can also be seen, as well as hollow ways, boundary banks and enclosed crofts.

The village was clearly planned because the rows of houses are set out in a regular pattern, perhaps by a lord of the manor – but when? Possibly the 10th century, but it could have been as late as the 12th century.

By about 1280 there were some 40 peasant families farming about 18 acres each, cultivating wheat and barley in the fields stretching out from the village over the chalk wolds. The community suffered from Scottish raids, famine, disease and economic troubles, and had halved in size by the 14th century. By about 1500 there were only four large farms left, and these were turned into a single sheep pasture over the next half-century.

The church reflects the history of the village it served. Founded in the 10th century, it expanded until about 1300, then lost aisles and shrank over the following two centuries.

Excavations revealed houses with low chalk walls, once supporting timber frames and thatched roofs. Judging from their rather drab pottery, the villagers of the 13th and 14th centuries did not have a wide range of possessions, and the bones of the villagers buried in the churchyard reveal hunger, disease and



A ruined church welcomes visitors to England's best-known deserted village



An enamel nameplate bears the name of a village that may have roots in the 10th century

high mortality. Excavation of a large house from about 1500, perhaps belonging to a greedy villager who had swallowed up neighbours' land, revealed its owner was prosperous enough to burn coal and drink ale from German stoneware jugs. **H**

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Sin city



A thief hangs from the gallows. Evidence suggests that brutal punishments did little to deter criminal behaviour in medieval London

Thievery, prostitution, bribery and murder – if you were looking for a rich stew of criminality, 14th-century London was the place to find it. **Bruce Holsinger** walks the mean streets of the medieval capital

On the night of 6 January 1337, John le Whyte, an animal skinner down from Cambridge, broke into a mercer's shop on the Lane of St Lawrence Jewry, around the corner from the London Guildhall. Among the goods that Whyte lifted from the shop of Geoffrey Punte were gold and silver rings, pearls, thread and bracelets – a nice haul, with a total value of 100 shillings.

According to Punte's suit against Whyte, preserved in one of the letter-books from the reign of Edward III, these goods had been "feloniously stolen at night", an offence with grave consequences for the condemned. John le Whyte was hanged, one of many petty thieves executed for such offences in the period.

Though medieval England often made short work of its criminals, frequent capital punishment was no more successful a deterrent in 14th-century London than it is in Texas today. Thievery, prostitution, murder, bribery and a thriving black market made the medieval city ripe for exploitation by those with a skill for the quick blade or picking a pocket.

In this respect, London in the later Middle Ages had more in common with the modern urban milieus of TV series such as *Prime Suspect* and *The Wire* than we might expect. As often as citizens observed church-mandated fasts and repented their sins, they hired prostitutes, cut purses, bribed wardmoots (small courts), and threw corpses into sewers.

Thanks to the patient archival work of urban historians over the past 20 years, medieval London's criminal underworld has

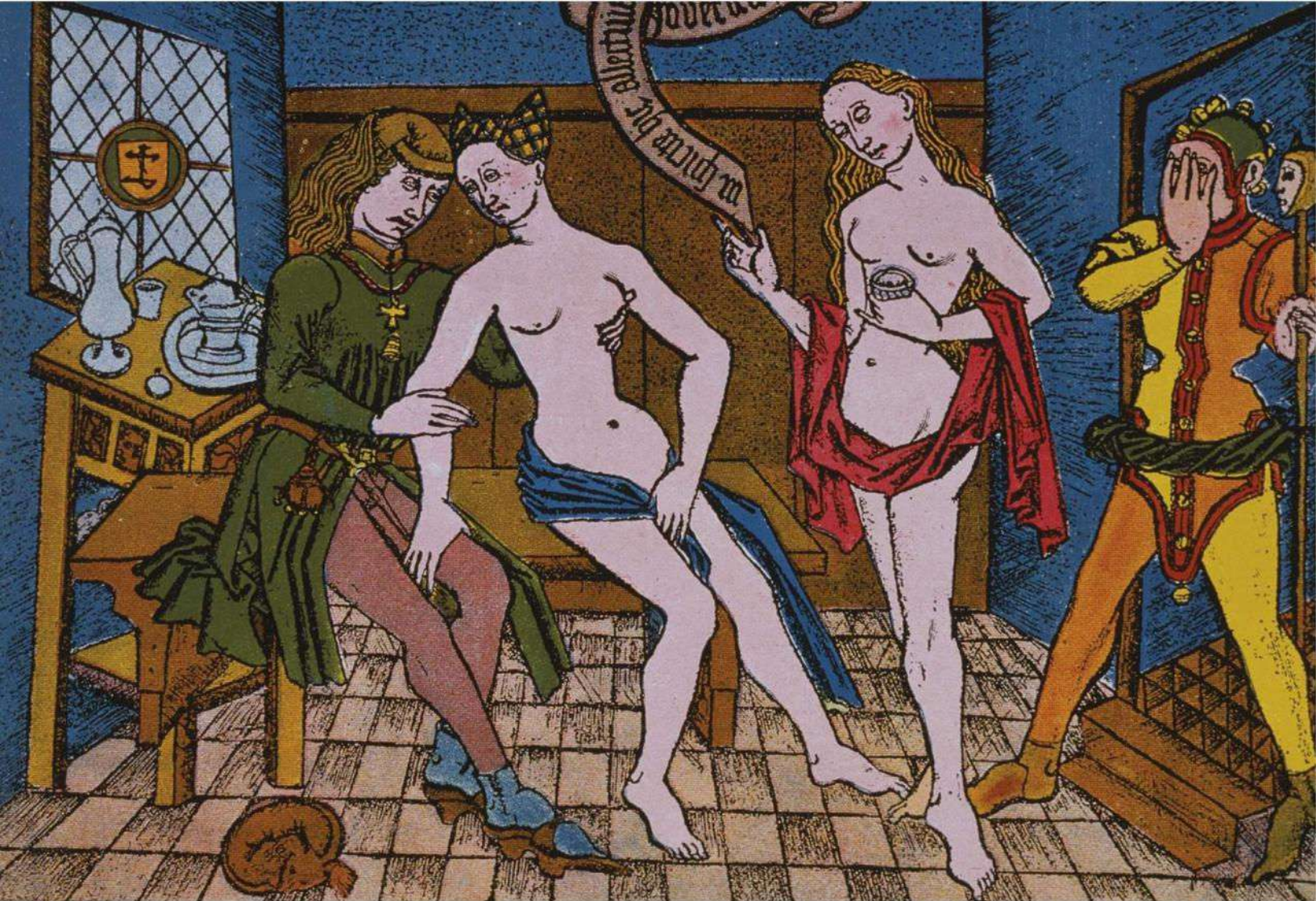
come into increasingly vivid focus, giving us intriguing glimpses of the many lives it shaped and affected.

It is important to understand that 'medieval London' was not one town but three. Much of the character of urban life (and, thus, urban crime) was shaped by the two smaller suburbs lying outside the walled city itself – and largely beyond its jurisdiction. One of the defining elements of urban life in the London-Southwark-Westminster triangle was the constant clash of laws, liberties, regulations and petty jurisdictions that could intensify the conflicts among a diverse citizenry with competing interests and affiliations.

Geography of vice

Significant, too, is what we might call the urban geography of vice. Consider the Southwark bankside, current home of Shakespeare's Globe, Southwark Cathedral and the ruins of Winchester Palace, still visible among the touristy bustle of Clink Street. At first glance, the location of this former residence of the bishops of Winchester would seem to suggest a degree of episcopal surveillance sufficient to ward off vice. In fact, it was in the bishop's own liberties that the city's most popular brothels were located for much of the medieval era.

The bishop himself served as their effective landlord (often shutting them down during parliament for appearance's sake), and it is surely no accident that some of the most frequently identified patronisers of prostitutes in surviving records of court proceedings turn out to be priests, monks and friars. The church and its moral teachings were hardly a guarantee against venial transgression.



A 15th-century depiction of a brothel. Prostitution was as much a part of London life as the saying of prayers and repenting of sins

“Appearing at the Guildhall, Rykener named any number of men with whom he had performed sex ‘as a woman’”

Despite a series of regulations that sought to confine the practice to Southwark and narrow its appeal, prostitution thrived in London too, whether in the ward of Farringdon Without – known as a frequent haunt of ‘common women’, as prostitutes were often called – or in a small neighbourhood nestled between Cheapside and the church of St Pancras, Soper Lane, that must have been a notorious district of sexual vice.

Evidence for the trade’s flourishing here comes in the suggestive names given to streets and alleys: Gropecunt Lane and Popkirtle Lane, narrow byways cutting north from the St Pancras churchyard and intersecting with Cheapside just across from Mercers’ Hall.

An account of another such precinct, uncovered by Ruth Karras in her history of medieval English prostitution, claims knowledge of a “privy place” behind a tavern in Queenhithe ward. It was “a good hiding place for thieves... many evil agreements are

made there, and many whores and bawds have there their shelter and leisure to make their false covenants”.

Sex “as a woman”

Perhaps the most fascinating document of sexual vice to survive from medieval London is the record from the mayor’s court of the interrogation of John Rykener, a male transvestite prostitute who lived and worked in Oxford and London in the 1380s and 1390s. Appearing in the Guildhall in women’s clothing, Rykener named any number of men – including multiple rectors and chaplains, several Franciscans, a Carmelite and three Oxford scholars – with whom he had performed sex “as a woman”. He also cited several women – wives and nuns alike – with whom he’d copulated “as a man”.

Rykener testified that he had received his training in the “unmentionable act” from a certain Anna, the whore of a servant in the

household of Sir Thomas Blount. This was likely the same Thomas Blount who would take an active role in the Epiphany Rising of 1399 against Henry IV, and who was executed gruesomely the following year.

Londoners of the 14th and 15th centuries had a sophisticated understanding of the vice-ridden city they inhabited, often associating particular districts with certain criminal proclivities. In the satire *London Lickpenny*, a Kentish man walks through the neighbourhood of Cornhill, “where there is much stolen gear to be found”. There he spies his “own hood, that I had lost in Westminster among the throng” – though he lacks the funds to purchase his headwear back from the thief openly peddling it on the street.

The city’s merchants and craftsmen were additional targets of suspicion, ire and prosecution, particularly when the health and safety of the populace were seen to be threatened by the mercantile cutting of corners. In July 1345, four butchers were forced to forfeit all of their meat, to the value of over nine shillings, for the offence of blocking the street with their wares.

The company of Spurriers (or spur-makers) was certainly concerned about the nocturnal

behaviour of its own members. At night, the company's medieval articles contend, "they introduce false iron, and iron that has been cracked" into their product, and they cheat by putting "gilt on false copper". Wandering about the streets all day "without working at their trade", such miscreant spurriers begin to smith only once "they have become drunk and frantic".

At the other end of the criminal spectrum from drunkenness and vagrancy were assault and murder, not infrequent occurrences in the city. By one historian's estimate, in the first half of the 14th century as many as two men a month died in drunken brawls in London, with the surviving combatants facing certain death on the gallows.

Some cases of murder proved particularly notorious. In one horrific incident from near the end of the Middle Ages, found by historian Shannon McSheffrey in a King's Bench indictment, two silkwomen, Elizabeth

Taillour and Alice Rolff, lay in wait for a woman named Elizabeth Knollys, an apparent rival in the craft. After seizing their victim, Taillour and Rolff drowned Knollys in a tub, burned as much of her body as they could, then threw the rest of the corpse down a latrine.

Though the murder apparently occurred on 12 September, the inquest did not take place until early November – suggesting that the charred remains may not have been found in the privy channel for weeks following the crime. Taillour admitted her guilt while Rolff 'plead[ed] her belly' (under English common law, pregnant women could sometimes receive a reprieve on a death sentence until they had given birth), claiming a pregnancy that a jury of matrons soon disproved. Both women hanged.

With such sordid behaviour a constant threat, how did the London authorities manage to keep a lid on things and guard

against excessive outbreaks of crime and vice? The city's mechanisms of enforcement were many and varied, enlisting aldermen, constables and other officials as well as citizens on volunteer patrol in the night watch.

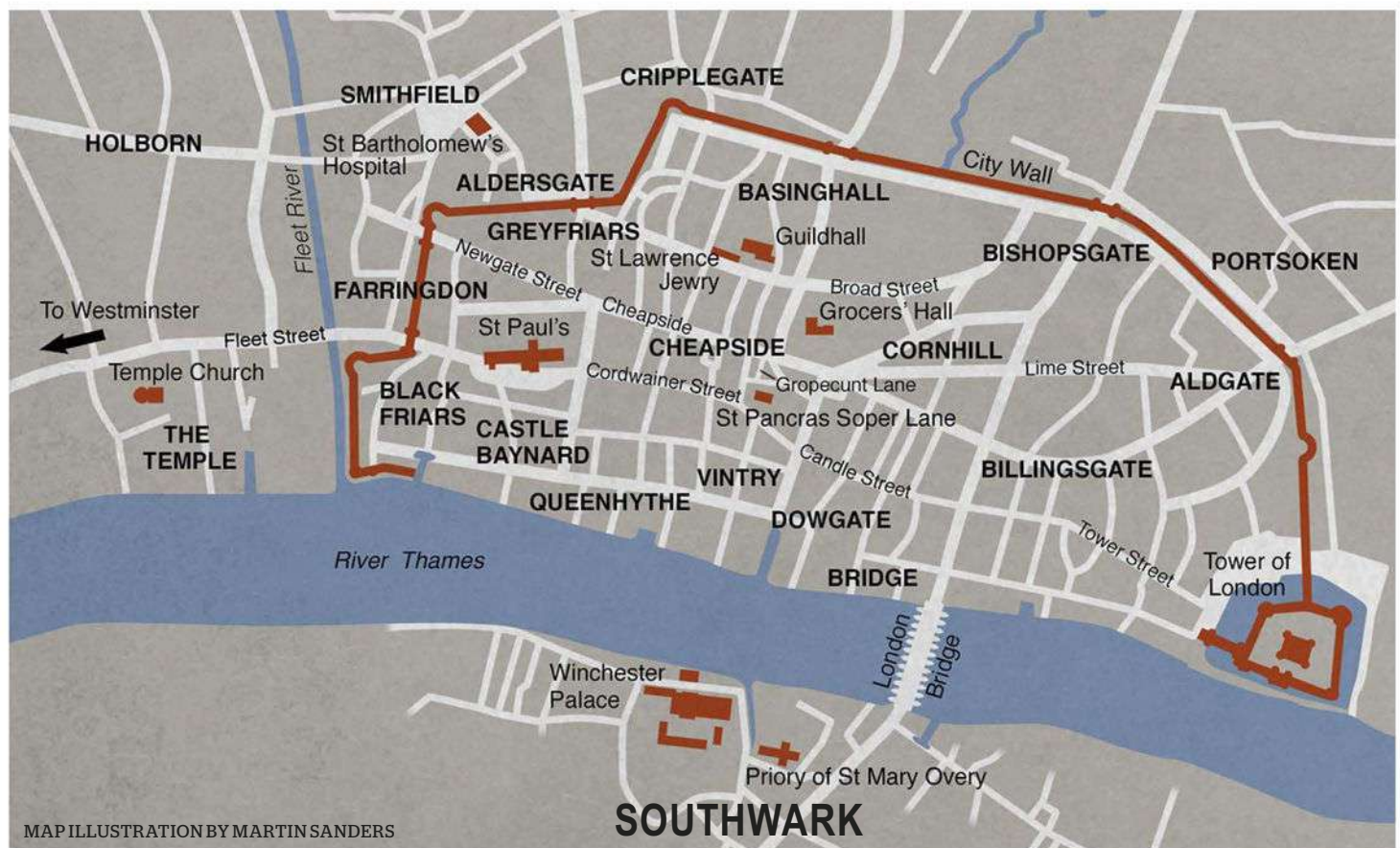
Habitual drunkards

The mayor required the wards to provide regular lists of habitual drunkards, civil offenders and women of ill repute. Meanwhile, royal and civic proclamations were shouted by criers at key landmarks, announcing new edicts or strengthened regulations – audible reminders of the Guildhall's never-ending efforts to maintain civic order.

Within the wards themselves, such duties often fell to the beades. Though originally charged with overseeing the raking and cleaning of streets, during the course of the 14th century London's beades assumed primary responsibility for keeping their wards free from ne'er-do-wells, including prostitutes,

THE SCENE OF THE CRIMES

From Cripplegate to Cheapside, a map showing some of medieval London's vice hot spots



“Taillour and Rolff drowned their victim in a tub, burned as much of her body as they could, then threw the rest of the corpse down a latrine”



A group of men hack another to death while others play backgammon in a medieval illumination. Up to two men a month died in drunken brawls in 14th-century London

“Several mayoral elections were won by force of arms, with murders in the streets going largely unprosecuted”

thieves and known highwaymen. The beadles and their men would often accompany the nightwatchmen on foot patrol after curfew, gathering up violators and tossing them in the Counter, the Tun or other of the city jails designated for offenders of public order.

Yet the Guildhall was hardly a beacon of lawfulness. The fierce rivalry between two lord mayors of London, Nicholas Brembre (see box, right) and John Northampton, during the 1380s marked a period of great urban strife and corruption at the highest levels. Several mayoral elections during these years were won by force of arms, with murders in the streets going largely unprosecuted. Civic regulations and means of enforcement can give us only a dim understanding of the actual criminal practices they were designed to control.

No one understood this gap between prohibition and practice more acutely than John Gower, a friend and literary rival of the poet Geoffrey Chaucer, who lived at the Southwark Priory of St Mary Overy in the later years of the 14th century.

Though Gower rarely mentions London or Southwark in his verse, his poetic corpus is a catalogue of urban vice and crime with a distinctive flair for the local. “Just as one sees the neighbours’ wives selling their hens in the

market,” he writes in his *Mirour de l’Omme*, “in the same way the bawd sells and bargains over virgins, and she makes them concubines to wanton lechers.”

Bribery, murder, theft, rapine: all come in for scrutiny under the poet’s pen – as does the justness of punishments, small and large. “That robbery is worthy of hanging,” Gower dryly observes, “we learn in the Bible.”

In a city defined in part by the moral hypocrisies of its lay and ecclesiastical leaders, Gower’s wry imagination delighted in the moral compromises that made medieval London’s criminal underworld a rich stew of violence and vice, oddly tasteful to a poet’s tongue. **II**

Bruce Holsinger is a professor of English at the University of Virginia. His debut historical novel, *A Burnable Book* (HarperCollins, 2014), set in London in 1385, has John Gower as protagonist

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

- **London in the Later Middle Ages** by Caroline Barron (OUP, 2005)
- **Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England** by Ruth Karas (OUP, 1998)
- **Deviance and Power in Late Medieval London** by Frank Rexroth (Cambridge, 2007)

LONDON LOW-LIFES

From the woman who pimped her daughter to the literary giant accused of abduction, four people who had brushes with the law in the 14th century

The perfidious poulterer

William Fot was a poulterer accused of trying to deceive and sicken the citizens of London by selling 18 “putrid and stinking” pigeons in Fleet Street. Four London cooks were summoned to test the pigeon meat. Upon determination that the pigeons were indeed unfit for sale or consumption, Fot was sent to the pillory where the pigeons were burned beneath his nose.

The murderous lord mayor

Nicholas Brembre, the ruthless boss of the city’s victualling guilds, was also mayor of London in 1377 and again from 1383 to 1385. He secured his elections in part through violence and even murder, ordering his thugs to attack the members of a rival faction. A fierce partisan of Richard II, Brembre was beheaded for treason in 1388 at the instigation of the Lords Appellant, a group of nobles who sought to restrain what they saw as the king’s tyrannical rule.

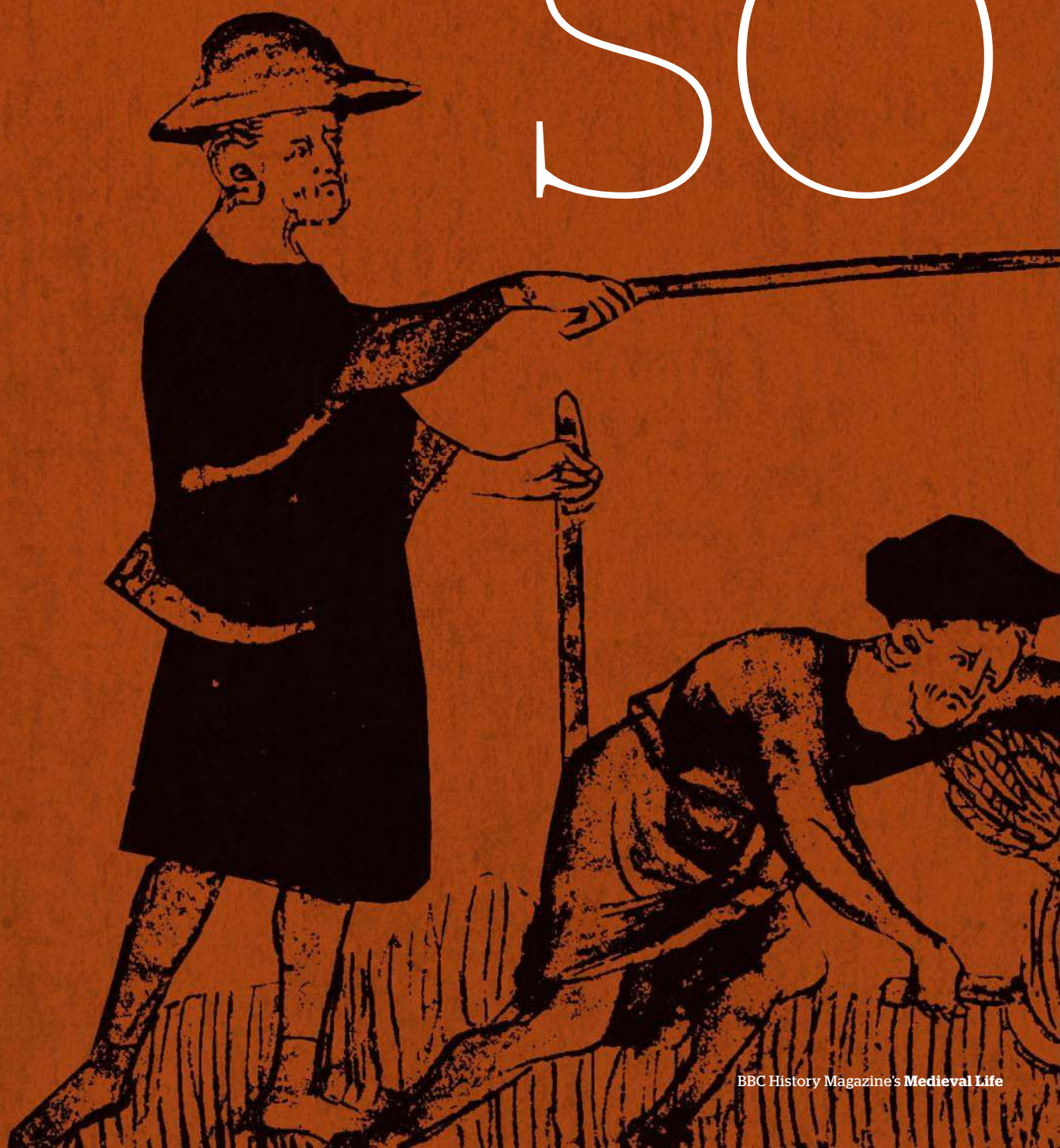
The Dutch bawd

Katherine the Dutchwoman was accused of pimping her own daughter – a surprisingly frequent charge in the legal history of London’s prostitutes. Katherine also beat her daughter for refusing to visit and service a man (identified as a Lombard) in his home. The unnamed daughter eventually had a child by the Italian ‘john’.

The poet who may have been a rapist

Geoffrey Chaucer was a poet, customs officer, justice of the peace – and, perhaps, rapist. In 1380, in the court of Chancery, Chaucer was released from a prior charge of the *raptus* (abduction and/or rape) of a woman named Cecily Chaumpaign. Though the case was settled out of court for a large payoff of £10, the documents strongly suggest an act of sexual violence subsequently obscured in the written record.

MED SO



FEUDAL CITY

The medieval world was governed by rules of class, religion, gender and law that seem extraordinary – yet, in some cases, surprisingly familiar – to us today





Doomed or disinterested?

Vivid, apocalyptic depictions of the Last Judgment provided powerful reminders of the importance of living a devout life. But did all medieval people actually believe in God? **John H Arnold** examines differing attitudes towards prevalent beliefs

The 14th-century painting of the Last Judgment in St James the Great Church in Dauntsey, Wiltshire, would have left the congregation in no doubt as to the fate that awaited 'sinners' on Doomsday



The European Middle Ages have sometimes been called an 'Age of Faith' – a period when the church wielded great power and the masses dutifully engaged in great acts of

devotion and penance. Religion, it is thought, permeated every aspect of life; for the general populace, belief was a matter of unquestioning, obedient credulity. But was this really so?

One might certainly think so from the following early 16th-century verse:

*"Wit wonders at, and nature cannot understand,
How maiden is mother, and God is man,
Leave thy asking and believe that wonder
For might has mastery, and reason goes under.
Praise God!"*

This little poem on the central mysteries of medieval Catholicism comes from the commonplace book of Richard Hill, a London alderman. It echoes many earlier instructions to the laity. Priests in 13th-century France were told that they "should frequently tell the laity that they should not search for the reason for the articles of faith, nor the sacraments". One of the most influential pastoral handbooks, the *Oculus sacerdotis* ("The Eye of the Priest"), written by an English priest named William of Pagula, firmly states that the transformation of bread into Christ's body in the sacrament of the Eucharist is a miracle, not something to be debated – "and most of all, not by the laity". Similar injunctions against discussion and enquiry are found in other pastoral works and poems.

But did everyone in the Middle Ages believe in God? Was reason always unquestioningly subordinate to the "might" and "mastery" of faith, as the poem dictates? There were obviously Jews and Muslims who believed in a different God (or, rather, the same God approached in a different way). There were various heretical sects who believed in a Christian God but a different form of Christianity, and much work on medieval religion in the last 30 years has demonstrated the independent vitality of orthodox lay piety. The very fact that a layman like Richard Hill saw fit to compile a book containing religious poems demonstrates the energy and reflective commitment of some individual acts of devotion. But beyond even these varied contours of faith there is good reason to question whether all medieval people were uniformly devout.

Historians can in fact find quite a bit of evidence for the existence of medieval doubt, scepticism and even some atheism. In fact, we have already met some of this material above. Despite its core message, the poem from Hill's commonplace book explicitly notes that there is "asking" about the tenets of faith, based



A scene of excommunication, from Jean Andre's painting *Decretales*. For some refusing to take the Eucharist, expulsion from the church wasn't a sufficient deterrent

"Historians can find quite a bit of evidence for the **existence of medieval doubt, scepticism and even some atheism**"

upon "wit" and "reason" (*skyll*, in Middle English). When discussing the Eucharist, the *Oculus sacerdotis* admits that the consecrated wafer continues to seem very much like ordinary bread. This, William of Pagula explains, is because faith depends upon more than human perception – a solid theological point. But William felt that this might not be sufficient persuasion, and provides three more practical reasons through which priests could seek to persuade their parishioners: the bread is not experienced as flesh and blood so that it does not provoke "horror" in those

receiving it, so that "pagans" do not ridicule Christians, and because people are not "accustomed to eating bleeding flesh".

Many late medieval texts display a similar element of nervousness when discussing the Eucharist. A tale told in many sermons narrates how common doubts could be transformed into faith. A housewife received the Eucharist from Pope Gregory the Great at mass, and when he said (in Latin): "This is the body of our Lord Jesus Christ," she laughed. Asked why, she replied: "Because I heard you say that the bread which I made with my own



hands is God's body!" In response to this, the bread changed into the shape of a finger and, seeing this miracle the woman, and those present, recovered their faith. Such stories are designed to strengthen orthodox faith.

Many collections of stories from saints' lives similarly tell of people brought to belief by a miracle, but sometimes this miracle was bestowed in punishment explicitly because of their earlier scepticism. For example, a man from Lucca is recorded as having long derided the supposed powers of Saint Zita, a local servant woman who had died in the 13th century. Every time her corpse farted, he said, she laid an egg. Whenever he saw an infirm person being carried to the shrine, he told the bearers to throw them to the ground. And whenever he heard of a miracle "or the ringing of the bells that rang [to announce] the miracles of the aforesaid body, he always

expressed derision". He is punished, and repents. The question is: how many others were there like him, but who did not get their supernatural comeuppance and persisted in their ridicule? Tales of miraculous punishment assert faith – but in doing so, admit the possibility of doubt.

Rejecting the Eucharist

More direct evidence can also be attested. In the late Middle Ages, bishops were supposed to make 'visitations' of their diocese: in each parish, a group of parishioners would be questioned about the state of the church, the clergy and their neighbours. The majority of reported cases were usually instances of sexual immorality. But also quite common – forming between about 10 and 30 per cent of recorded complaints in some late medieval English records – were cases of non-attendance at

Did clerics believe?

The medieval clergy formed the front line of the church's engagement with the laity. They were not always up to the task. Visitation records note parish priests who took concubines and fathered children, demanded payment for baptisms and burials, and occasionally revealed the secrets that they had heard in confession.

Some took the clerical tonsure primarily in order to gain an education and to pursue an administrative career. Bishops berated priests for gambling, attending taverns, and generally having too secular a life. Unbeneficed clergy had to do what they could to earn a living, and some were probably much closer in outlook to the poor laity than the bishop.

Certainly, a few priests lost their vocation and, perhaps, even their faith. In southern France in the late 13th century, a priest called Arnaud Morlana was reported to inquisitors for having voiced doubts about transubstantiation, and questioning the validity of scripture.

Some decades later, another French priest called Pierre Clergue befriended both Cathar heretics and Catholic villagers, and had a very cynical attitude to all aspects of faith, being much more interested in seducing local women than holding to any particular set of beliefs.

However, medieval parish priests have been somewhat unfairly stereotyped. Sixteenth-century Protestant reformers highlighted clerical failings, but ignored the benefits they provided. It is clear from other evidence that many worked hard on behalf of their parishioners, took the time to administer to them socially and spiritually, and did their best to provide the framework of Christian piety in their parishes. They, most surely, did believe.



One of the best-known representations of a medieval-period clergyman – the nun's priest from *The Canterbury Tales*

*An Angel Weighing
A Soul* by Ridolfo di Arpo
Guariento, painted
c1348-54, reflected the
church's obsession with
the fate of the soul. Yet
not all of our medieval
forebears believed in
the afterlife





A 15th-century silver gilt chalice from the priory church of St Peter and Paul in Leominster, Herefordshire. The Eucharist was a focal point for medieval scepticism

church, or similar non-conformity.

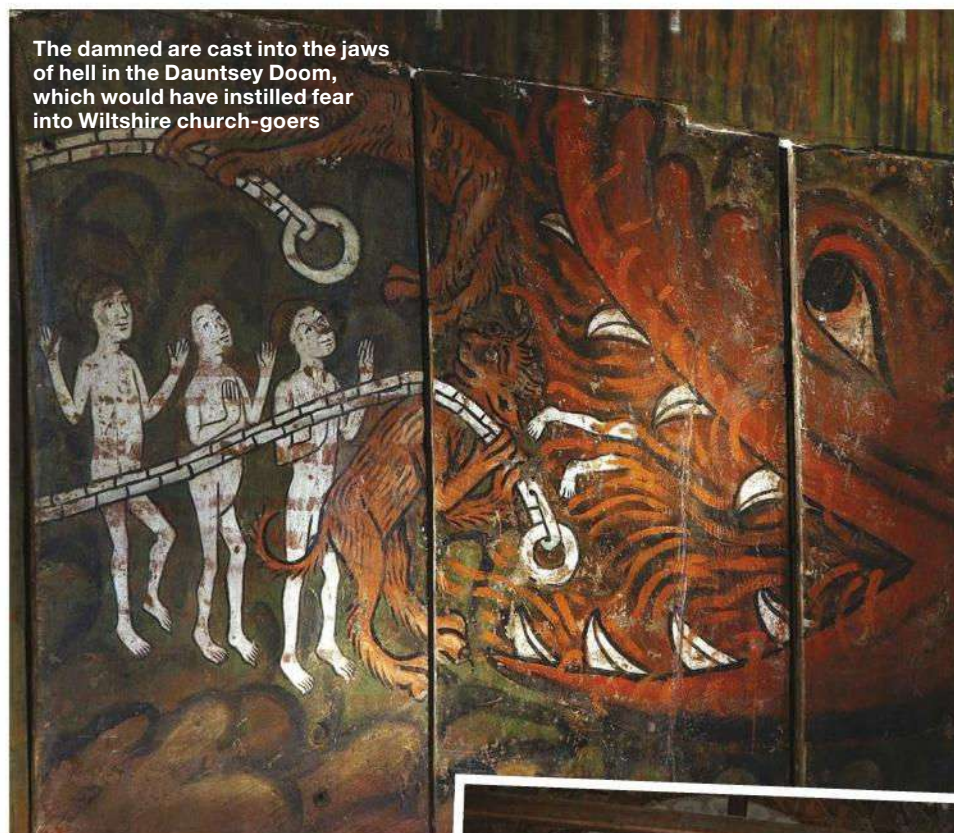
On Sundays and feast days everyone was supposed to be at church for the mass, and to abstain from all labour – but not all obeyed. For various people, it would seem that practical or commercial matters took priority. In the diocese of Lincoln, a number of people were reported for going fishing or hunting when they should have been in church – possibly a leisure activity, but perhaps an important way of supplementing diet and income. This was almost certainly the case with one Alicia Kellsull who “collected crabs and nuts” rather than attend mass.

In Norfolk, the shoemakers John and William Braine stayed away because they were off selling their products in neighbouring parishes. The wives of John Austyn, Robert Carter and William Hebburn ran ‘public taverns’ that sometimes kept them from mass, and we also find cases of those who attended taverns rather than the pulpit on Sundays. Many people from many sets of visitations were reported for working on the Sabbath (though it is not always clear whether this implied absence from the church service).

Some of these absences might have arisen through necessity, or from strongly competing priorities, rather than a basic lack of interest in going to church. But others are clearly based on a more sceptical attitude. In 1408, John Joys of Salisbury diocese was reported for disparaging his local priest, and being present scarcely once a year. From the deanery of Wisbech, Thomas Bluwyk did not usually attend, “and when he does, he talks”; two of his neighbours were reported similarly.

William Herwer Junior, from Norwich diocese, could not be bothered to get out of bed. Simon Downaby from the diocese of

“A woman in southern France told her neighbours that **the soul was nothing but blood or wind**”

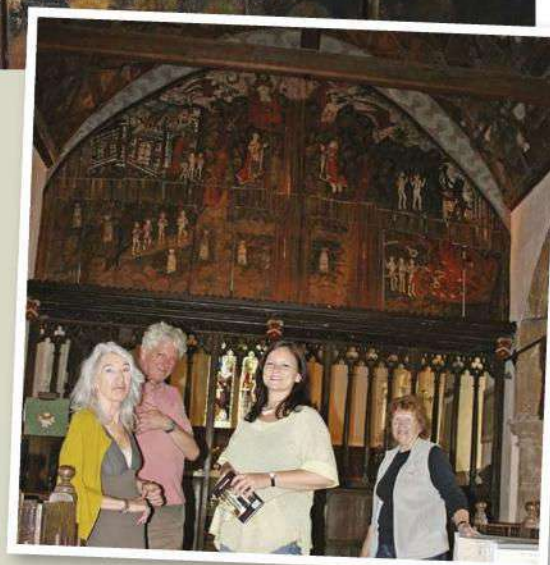


The damned are cast into the jaws of hell in the Dauntsey Doom, which would have instilled fear into Wiltshire church-goers

Doomsday in Dauntsey

The Dauntsey Doom painting is an imposing reflection of medieval views on faith, sin, heaven and hell

The Dauntsey Doom painting (pictured in full on pages 80–81) shows the saved being admitted into heaven by St Peter (top left), and the damned being cast into the jaws of hell (bottom right). It depicts the Last Judgment and is a reminder to medieval people that the choices they made in their earthly lives would affect their souls. Paintings of the Last Judgment, or Doom, were a common feature in churches up until the Reformation, but few survive today. This one, in the parish church of St James the Great at Dauntsey in Wiltshire, was created in the late 14th century. It originally filled the 4m wide gap between the rood screen and the church ceiling.



Following its restoration, the Doom painting can now be enjoyed by modern-day visitors to Dauntsey

While it might instill the fear of hell into sinners, it would also be a comfort to the devout, and a reminder of the redemption that was possible. The Dauntsey Doom was removed in the 1990s for a long, painstaking restoration, but can now be seen in situ at the church once more.

Building belief

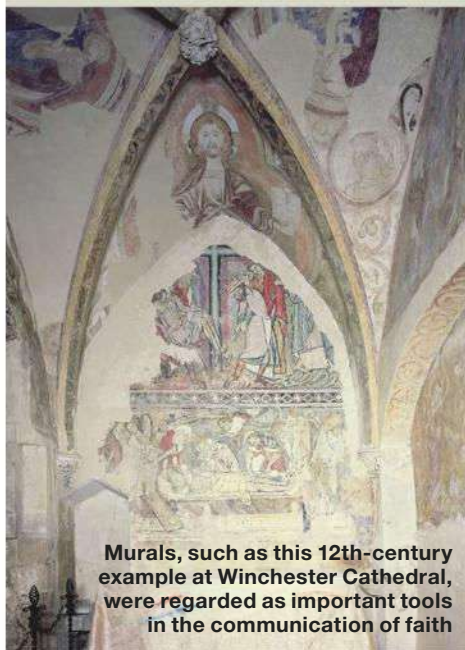
There were various ways in which medieval lay people were taught about the Christian faith. All priests were supposed to preach sermons each Sunday on different aspects of belief, and to explain the core tenets of faith at several points in the year. A good preacher could, for example, make use of vivid and memorable stories, known as 'exempla', to illustrate their sermons.

Various collections of exempla still survive in many manuscript copies across Europe.

Art was also important in communicating faith. Medieval churches were brightly decorated places, with wall paintings depicting episodes in the Christian narrative, and devotional statues and paintings of saints. The most ubiquitous image was the simplest and most powerful: two lines drawn as a cross, found also on loaves, on walls and even on domestic furniture.

By the late Middle Ages, there was a clear role for some lay people in private devotional manuscripts, most commonly 'books of Hours' containing prayers and sometimes devotional illuminations. Richard Hill's commonplace book contained recipes and medical advice, but was predominantly a collection of devotional prose and poems. Such works might be read in private by an individual, but were perhaps most often kept in order to be read out aloud in the home, to both family members and servants.

Instruction at home was probably the most important route to faith. Parents and godparents were enjoined to teach children the basics, usually 'Our Father', the Ave Maria and the Creed. This was presumably the most powerful way of instilling belief – but we have little access to what exactly happened in the domestic realm.



Murals, such as this 12th-century example at Winchester Cathedral, were regarded as important tools in the communication of faith

Lincoln was noted for non-attendance by the parishioners in 1519 specifically because they did not think him "firm in faith". And of John Inglie of Blunham it was reported that "at the time of the elevation of the body of the Lord in the mass he did not respect that body of the Lord but bent his head down and laughed stupidly". Perhaps in a similar vein, Richard Lyllyngston of Castle Combe admitted, when questioned by his bishop in the 15th century, that "whan so ever was eny prechyng or techyng of the word of god in the pulpyte, I wold contrary hit atte alehouse".

Rejecting the Eucharist

That last case came amid trials for 'Lollardy', the late medieval English heresy thought to be founded upon John Wyclif's radical theology that rejected, among other things, the sacramental nature of the Eucharist. Perhaps some of the people mentioned above were Lollards, firm in a different faith rather than sceptics.

We do, however, find many similar cases from other European countries. In the early 14th century, the bishop of Montauban, in southern France, bewailed the fact that many men did not come to mass on Sundays; visitation records from Cérisy in France turn up numerous examples to support his complaint. One specific case demonstrates an interesting mixture of faith and truculent scepticism: Sanson Vautier did not receive the Eucharist for seven years, and said that blessed bread was just as good as the Eucharist, if it was taken with good intentions. He said, moreover, that he did not fear excommunication, and that "his own labour" would save him.

From a visitation in the diocese of Barcelona in 1303, we hear that: "Pedro de Insula did not come to church nor had they seen [him do this] for 10 years, nor his mother nor his wife... except at times of solemn festivals," and moreover "nearly all the parishioners are bad church-goers such that when mass is celebrated they play in the streets and blaspheme God." Similar complaints can be found from elsewhere in France, Spain and Italy; indeed, a detailed study of tradesmen in 14th-century Prato, in Tuscany, found that hardly a shop stayed closed on Sundays, despite the repeated injunctions of priests and local confraternities against Sunday labour.

Not attending mass, hence not being present for the essential miracle of God's presence on Earth in the form of bread and wine, raises quite a question mark over the nature of these people's faith. We can usually only guess at how to interpret such absences. Where we do find explicit statements about motives, they often suggest hostility to clerical rituals and

"Not attending mass raises a question mark over the nature of these people's faith"

financial exactions; even in England, these extend beyond specifically Lollard attitudes.

But there is further evidence from across Europe of people holding more clearly sceptical ideas. A southern French bishop, in a large theological tract written in the 1270s, rebutted among other things "those who say that the soul dies with the body". Such a belief might be connected to the philosophy of Aristotle, recently "rediscovered" in western Europe via Arabic learning.

Yet belief in the death of the soul is also found prior to the translation of Aristotelian texts, and in social settings far distant from academia. In the early 11th century, the chronicler Alpert of Metz told of a tavern conversation wherein a man claimed that "the soul of man is nothing, and in his last breath it is utterly dispersed on the breeze".

Dominican preachers related similar stories in later centuries, and in their sermons bewailed similar unbeliefs among the laity. Giordano da Pisa said that: "There are many people today who do not believe there is another life, or that things could be better than in this one." Humbert de Romans reported "unbelievers" who "are very unhappy when their loved ones die. This is because they do not believe that they will live after this life."

Were these just stories made up by preachers to shock their flock into a more active faith? That may have been the intent, but the sermons nonetheless relate a kind of unbelief that the audience was expected to recognise. Moreover, one can find a few instances of people directly stating such doubts. In 1492, Thomas Tailour was sentenced to penances for, among other things, admitting that he had "declared that when a man or woman dies in their body, then also dies their soul, for as the light of a candle is put out by casting it away or in other ways quenched by blowing or shaking it, so the soul is quenched by the death of the body". He was not alone.

Around the same time, a German called Hermann of Ryswick was condemned for teaching that the soul died when the body died. A century earlier, a woman called Guillemette Benet of Ornolac in southern France told her neighbours on several occasions that the soul was nothing but blood or wind. Benet arrived at this conclusion through two personal experiences: in the first, she had accidentally banged her nose and

An image of a fool denying the existence of God, taken from a liturgical book, c1350



noted the subsequent nosebleed; in the second, she closely observed a friend's dying child to see if anything left the infant's mouth upon the moment of death. Seeing only the exhalation of breath, she came to believe that this was all that the soul was, and that there was no heaven nor hell nor other life.

"I vow to God, there is no soul"

Several other people from the same area attested to similar scepticism. In late medieval Spain, inquisitors investigating *conversos* (Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity) found some beliefs that were neither Jewish nor Christian: "There is nothing except being born and dying and having a nice girlfriend and plenty to eat"; "I vow to God, there is no soul"; "I swear to God that this hell and paradise is nothing more than a way of frightening us, like people saying to children 'the bogeyman will get you'."

Perhaps these few people were but a tiny minority, and perhaps the evidence for non-attendance at church and ecclesiastical concerns regarding lay people's doubts should be read quite separately. Certainly, the great

majority of medieval Christians were active believers, and devout – if not necessarily unquestioningly obedient – in their faith. But some greater number may have had more or less rebellious thoughts, yet do not come into historical view because they were never found out. Raymond de l'Aire, from southern France, admitted to an inquisitor that he did not believe in the soul, thought that there was no God, no Virgin Mary and no Christ, that the Eucharist was nothing but bread, and that there would be no Resurrection. Unsurprisingly, he saw no value to what priests did during mass. But still, to some degree, he conformed. He gave alms, he said, not because he believed it would do his soul any good, but "only so that he would have a good reputation among his neighbours, and they would repute him to be a good man". How many other people sat beside him in church, and never voiced their doubts? **LI**

John H Arnold is author of *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (Bloomsbury, 2005), and professor of medieval history at Birkbeck, UCL

DISCOVER MORE

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► **Reason and Society in the Middle Ages** by Alexander Murray (Oxford University Press, 1985)

► **'Social Mentalities and the Case of Medieval Scepticism'** by Susan Reynolds (*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, sixth series, vol 1, pp21–41, CUP, 1991)

► **'Religious Faith and Doubt in Late Medieval Spain: Soria c1450–1500'** by John Edwards (*Past and Present*, vol 120, no 1, pp3–25, Oxford Journals, 1988)

WEBSITE

View a scanned version of Richard Hill's commonplace book at Oxford's Early Manuscripts website, in the Balliol College collection, MS 354. The poem is on folio 159 (verso) (p340) <http://image.ox.ac.uk>

VISIT

See the restored Doom painting at the parish church of St James the Great, Dauntsey, Wiltshire. dauntseychurch.co.uk

ON THE PODCAST

► John H Arnold discusses faith on our podcast historyextra.com/medieval-life

Saints and sinners

During the Middle Ages, tales abounded of saintly intervention saving those on trial for their lives.

John Hudson looks at propaganda that supported the mythic status of the saints and of church power

The idea of saints performing miracles would inspire a large degree of cynicism in our largely secular world. In the Middle Ages, however, most people accepted that saints could intervene in daily life, including areas now the preserve of specialists. Most common were miracles concerning illness, but saints also participated in the field of law and justice.

A letter from Hervey, bishop of Ely, records a noteworthy event in 1115 or 1116. It concerned a man called Bricstan, who lived in Ely's village of Chatteris. The letter describes him as a layman of modest means, who lent money to his needy neighbours but not at interest. He was "neither better than other good men nor worse than bad ones". Bricstan decided that he wanted to become a monk of Ely, a church dedicated to St Peter and to St Etheldreda. However, as the letter details, an official of King Henry I...

"...more particularly a servant of the devil with wolf-like fangs, appeared on the scene... His name was Robert and he was nick-named 'Malarteis', from the Latin meaning ill-doer. The name was deserved, for he seemed to have no function except to catch men out... He accused all equally whenever he could, striving with all his might to harm everyone... If he could find no valid reason for condemning them, he became an inventor of falsehood and father of lies through the devil who spoke in him."

He claimed to the monks that Bricstan was a common thief...

"...who has seized the king's money by larceny and hidden it, and is trying to escape judgement and punishment for his crime, not



St Etheldreda (AD 630–79) was said to appear in visions during medieval times

"Religious belief was closely involved in medieval justice, most notably through trial by ordeal"

for any other kind of salvation. For he found hidden treasure, and by secretly stealing from it has become a usurer."

On Robert's command, the monks refused to receive Bricstan, and he was sent for trial before the royal justice, Ralph Basset, and the county court of Huntingdonshire. Bricstan denied the charges, but his opponents made fun of his appearance, and he was unjustly condemned. He was bound, taken to London, and placed in iron fetters within a dark prison. Suffering from cold and hunger...

"...with a sorrowful heart and all the voice he could raise, he called incessantly on St Benedict, under whose rule he had vowed in all sincerity to live... and on the holy virgin Etheldreda, in whose monastery he had proposed to do so."

A vision of saints

After five months in prison, Bricstan continued to pray in a feeble voice. One night, in a blaze of light, St Benedict appeared to the supplicant like a saintly Arnold Schwarzenegger, together with St Etheldreda and her sister St Sexburga.

"The venerable Benedict placed his hand on the ring fetters and broke them on both sides, drawing them from the feet of the prisoner in such a way that he felt nothing at all and the saint seemed to have broken them more by his command than by force. When he had pulled them off he tossed them aside almost contemptuously and struck the beam which supported the room above the dungeon with such violence that he made a great crack in it."

"At the sound of the impact the guards, who were sleeping in the room above, were all awakened in terror. Fearing that the prisoners had fled they rushed to the prison. Finding



St Benedict offers his soul to God in this 15th-century painting

the doors undamaged and locked, they turned the keys and entered. When they saw the man they had thrown into fetters was freed, they marvelled greatly.”

Miraculous reprieve

The happenings were reported to the queen. She dispatched Ralph Basset, who checked that no witchcraft was involved, realised that a miracle had occurred, and then, “rejoicing and weeping”, brought Bricstan to the queen and barons.

The story of Bricstan is a particularly full and dramatic account of saintly intervention, but otherwise not atypical. Such stories illustrate the belief in the powers of the saints. This was promoted by churchmen such as Bishop Hervey – and such publicity may have

been necessary: the same clerical writers mention laymen who were far from reverent, such as the man who bared his bottom and broke wind at St Aldhelm’s shrine as it was borne past him.

Religious belief was closely involved in medieval justice, most notably through trial by ordeal. Through a physical test, God revealed his judgment. Some ordeals were undertaken by individuals. For example, the accused might carry a red-hot piece of iron for several paces. The hand that had carried the iron was then bound up and examined three days later. If the burn was clean, the accused was innocent; if it was infected, he or she was guilty. In trial by battle concerning a crime, accused and accuser would fight; God’s judgment would be demonstrated through

victory. Here was another opportunity for saintly intervention.

“Two men who had been adjudged to a duel came together, one being much bigger and stronger than the other. The stronger man catches the weaker one, lifts him high above his head ready to throw him hard on the ground. The smaller man hanging thus in the air lifts up his mind to heaven and says a short prayer: ‘Help, holy Thomas martyr.’ The danger was great and sudden, and the time for prayer short. There are witnesses who were present: the stronger man, as if oppressed by the weight of the holy name, suddenly collapsed under the one he held and was vanquished.”

Miracle stories thus reveal certain key features of the judicial system of the time. Saints seem to have favoured the young and the physically weak, perhaps providing protection for those lacking a powerful worldly protector. Saints could prevent injustice being done, for example by helping the unjustly accused during their trial or before punishment. Such saintly interventions could be seen as making up for some of the defects of judicial processes: the dangers of a court being biased against one party, the problem of the strong fighting the weak in trial by battle or the lack of routine practice of dealing with miscarriages of justice in criminal cases.

Saving the repentant

There may well be some truth in this view. However, miraculous interventions did not necessarily reinforce or correct the judicial system on its own terms. Saints might intervene when a person was guilty but repentant. A hardened criminal, sentenced to death but repentant, invoked the help of St John. The saint duly acted, the manacles fell from the man, and he went and offered his chains to the shrine of St John.

We may have here a distinction between views of crime, including a more worldly one that emphasised punishment for the deed, and a religious one that emphasised the mental state of the accused. Modern historians may want miracles to relate to and illustrate the functioning of medieval society, including judicial systems. Our medieval sources are much more ready to allow saints to make up their own minds when they should intervene. **H**

John Hudson is professor of legal history at the University of St Andrews, and a member of our advisory panel


DISCOVER MORE

BOOK


► **The Formation of the English Common Law** by John Hudson (Routledge, 1996)

Medieval tourism

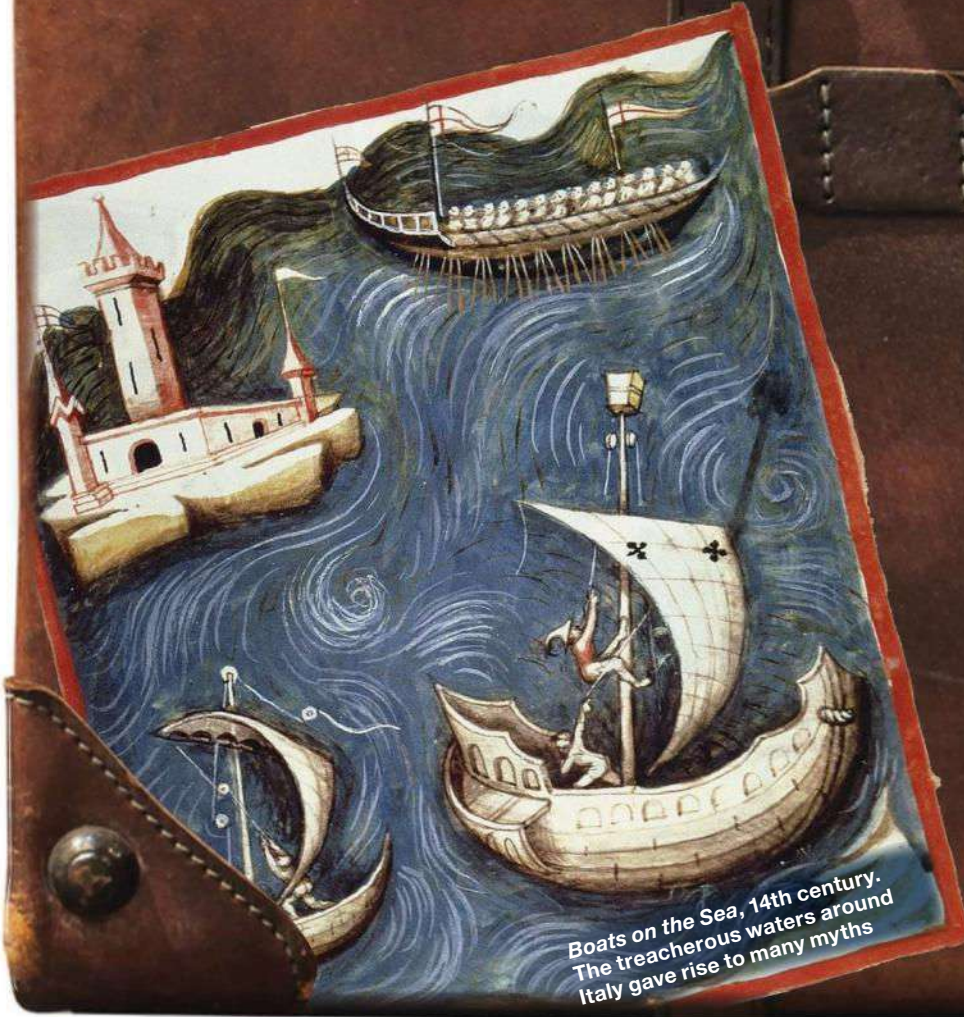
Recent research suggests that medieval tourism was widespread, writes **Paul Oldfield**, and existed in a world of pilgrimage and classical curiosities



Travellers depicted in the 13th-century *Roman de Jules Cesar*. Many medieval towns targeted, and competed for, tourists



A lead alloy pilgrim badge, 1300–1400, depicting the shrine of St Thomas Becket



Boats on the Sea, 14th century. The treacherous waters around Italy gave rise to many myths



Jacob's Journey, a manuscript illumination, c1411. Hospitals and monastic houses would spring up alongside popular travel routes

One enduring perception of medieval Europe is of a static, confined world in which most people rarely travelled beyond their immediate locality – and when they did, movement was undertaken primarily for pragmatic reasons.

Research in recent decades has significantly revised this picture. High numbers of people regularly travelled both short and long distances; more interestingly, some of this movement was driven by motivations that we might associate with the modern-day tourist. If we readjust our modern understanding of tourism and place it into a medieval context, we can soon see that many medieval people travelled for renewal, for leisure and for thrill-seeking, and that an abundance of medieval ‘tourist’ services catered for these activities.

The region comprising southern Italy and Sicily offers a particularly vivid illustration of this phenomenon in the 11th and 12th centuries. Due to its position in the central Mediterranean, the region has always been pivotal to wider currents of movement and travel. And from the later 11th century it began to attract even more European visitors, for three main reasons. First, southern Italy and Sicily was conquered by bands of Normans who unified a region that had previously been politically fragmented and host to a patchwork of Greek Christians, Latin Christians, Jews and Muslims. Indeed, by 1130 the Normans had created a powerful new monarchy in the middle of the Mediterranean, an area that had for centuries been dominated by Muslim sea-power. The Normans, therefore, enabled Christian shipping and travellers to move more securely and freely.

Second, various factors converged to boost the popularity of international pilgrimage. After the beginning of the crusading movement in 1095, Europe experienced its golden era of devotional travel, much of which moved through southern Italy and Sicily en route to Jerusalem.

Third, in the 12th century Europe underwent a cultural renaissance. Learned individuals travelled further afield to seek knowledge, to uncover classical traditions, and to encounter alternative experiences. Southern Italy and Sicily, steeped in classical history and with a Greek and Islamic past, attracted visitors avid to imbibe both ancient and eastern learning. The result of these three combined strands was an influx of visitors to the region – people who were not migrants, conquerors or traders, but travellers in their own right: what we might identify as tourists.



“Visitors to the region were not **migrants, conquerors or traders** but travellers”

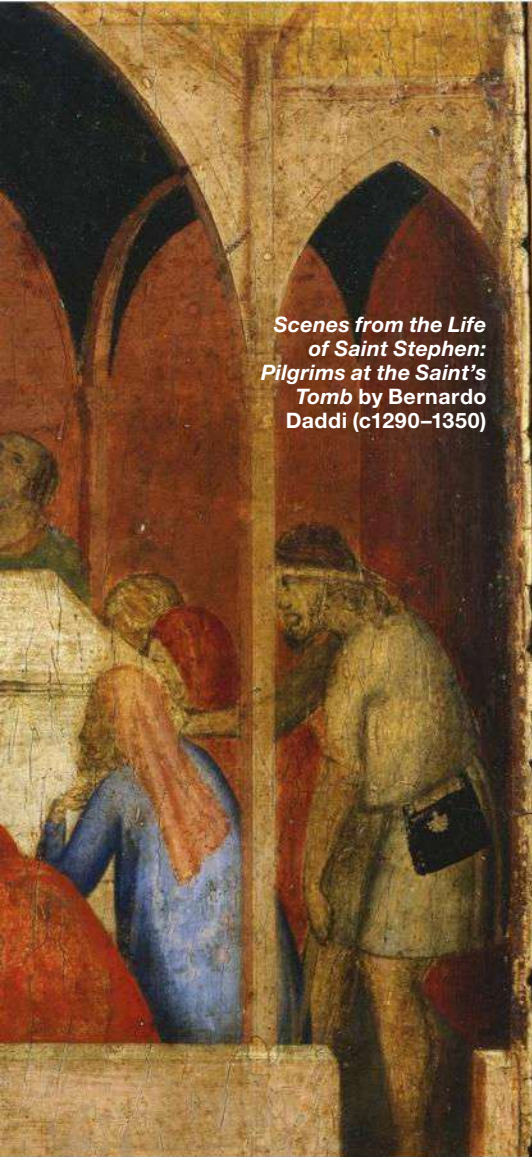
Pilgrimage represents perhaps the most apparent medieval equivalent of the tourist trade. Some pilgrims travelled with not solely pious motivations – a pilgrimage might cloak political and economic agendas, or be imposed as a judicial punishment. But whatever the incentive, adopting the pilgrim’s staff conferred a theoretical and universal status in which the individual acquired a new identity forged in the act of the journey to a particular shrine.

Between the pilgrimage’s start and end points, while the pilgrim was traversing alien territories, he was encouraged to imitate Christ, to experience challenge and hardship and to consider his own salvation. Indeed, at many shrines along their journey, pilgrims practised an act known as incubation, in which they stayed and slept near the holy

tomb, sometimes for days, in order to receive cures or divine revelations. In this sense, the pilgrim in his fundamentals was comparable to many modern-day travellers: an experiential tourist, absorbed in the act of journeying, partaking in a detox – not merely of the body, as at a luxury spa, but also of the soul – like a modern meditative retreat achieved while on the move.

As international pilgrimage expanded dramatically in the central Middle Ages, southern Italy took on a key role in the pilgrim’s journey; it acted as a bridge to salvation by connecting two of the greatest shrine centres of the Christian world: Rome and Jerusalem.

This ‘bridge’ was a geographic reality. Southern Italy possessed one of medieval Europe’s more sophisticated travel infrastructures. Being so close to the heart of the former Roman empire, it still boasted several functioning Roman roads – the motorways of the Middle Ages – which linked into the Via Francigena, the main route that brought travellers from western Europe across the Alps to Rome. Roads such as the Via Appia and Via Traiana enabled travellers to move across the south Italian Apennines to the



Scenes from the Life of Saint Stephen: Pilgrims at the Saint's Tomb by Bernardo Daddi (c1290–1350)

coastal ports of Apulia, while the Via Popillia wound through Calabria and directed visitors to the bustling Sicilian port of Messina. Thanks also to the Norman conquest, the region offered relatively safe maritime travel, too.

South Italian ports hosted fleets of well-informed local ships as well as those of the emergent commercial powers of Genoa, Pisa and Venice that traded in them.

Strong foundations

The pilgrim could, therefore, rely on secure, efficient and direct connections. At the same time new hospitals, inns, bridges and monastic houses emerged along southern Italy's main pilgrim routes or near shrines that foreign visitors would attend.

The junctions at Capua, and Benevento, and the major Apulian and Sicilian ports (which often hosted pilgrim hospitals belonging to Holy Land military monastic orders – the Templars and Hospitallers) were full of such buildings offering shelter and sustenance to the traveller.

Unfortunately, because no reliable statistical data exists on how many travellers, pilgrims and crusaders (the three often

indistinguishable) traversed these roads and sailed to the Holy Land from these south Italian ports, we must rely on indirect evidence that suggests the region was one of the most frequented in the medieval world.

This evidence can be found in the creation of all that travel infrastructure, and in contemporary accounts of the region's ports teeming with travellers.

One commentator of the First Crusade noted that “many went to Brindisi, Otranto received others, while the waters of Bari welcomed more”. The Spanish Muslim traveller Ibn Jubayr, passing through Messina in 1184, described it as a frenetic port adapted to foreign travel: it was a “market of the merchant infidels [ie Christians], the focus of ships from the world over, and thronging always with companies of travellers by reason of the lowness of prices... Its markets are teeming, and it has ample commodities to ensure a luxurious life. Your days and nights in this town you will pass in full security.”

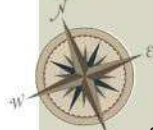
Later, in the mid-13th century, the English chronicler Matthew Paris produced a superb illustrated strip-map showing a travel itinerary from London to the Holy Land in which he pinpointed Apulia and the port of Otranto as the best route, orientating the reader to Otranto pictorially through a series of symbols and the image of a boat.

The foreign visitors to the region were of diverse social status. Most of the surviving evidence focuses on elite travellers – kings, counts, bishops – primarily because their status and wealth drew comment. But travel, and pilgrimage in particular, was also undertaken by the very poorest. Monastic rules outlined the monks' duty to offer free hospitality to travellers, and we have many reports of poor pilgrims visiting Christendom's most far-flung shrines.

Pilgrimage offered a symbolic cleansing of body and mind

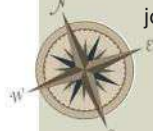


Other medieval European tourist destinations



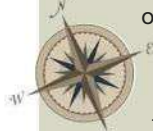
Santiago de Compostela

hosted the shrine of St James and became one of the most popular pilgrim destinations in the central Middle Ages. In the 12th century a text known as the *Liber Sancti Jacobi* was produced to guide visitors during their visit. The experience was also enhanced as the route to the shrine could pass various locations in south-west France that were associated with the epic poem *Song of Roland*, and by the dangerous journey across the Pyrenees.



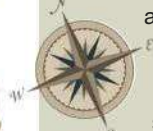
Rome

attracted scores of visitors with the revival of interest in the classical past and the growing power of the papacy. Travellers wondered at the city's ancient ruins, and books such as *The Marvels of Rome* by Master Gregory were produced to cater for this interest. Rome also possessed some of Christendom's leading shrines, most notably those of saints Peter and Paul.



Jerusalem and the Holy Land

received thousands of pilgrims from all across Europe, especially during the crusading movement when Jerusalem was under Christian rule (1099–1187). Travellers visited all of the major sites associated with Jesus Christ and the Bible – most obviously the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, but also Bethlehem and the river Jordan. Jerusalem hosted numerous large pilgrim hospitals and hostels.



Constantinople,

like Rome, was one of the greatest store-houses of Christian relics, and the capital of Byzantium could awe the visitor with its wealth of ancient monuments and learning. More and more western Europeans encountered the city as they passed through it on the crusades, and accounts of the city's magnificence, revered shrines and opulent architecture filtered back to the west. Indeed, much of this treasure was pillaged and transferred to Europe after the city was sacked in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade.

One poverty-stricken man from southern Italy, for example, had been able to visit the Holy Sepulchre and the shrine of St Cataldus at Taranto, his travel funded primarily by the proceeds of begging. It was also good advertising for shrine centres to be seen to cater for all backgrounds. Indeed, attracting foreign visitors was, as it is today, desirable and lucrative – they spent money on local services and profitable tolls. Like today's travel agents, the guardians of many of southern Italy's shrine centres targeted, and competed for, travellers.

The iconography within some shrine complexes catered for the pilgrim's transcendental mindset with images echoing the theme of salvation, and depicting Christ as a pilgrim. Texts were also produced to show, for example at the shrine of St Nicholas the Pilgrim at Trani, that the saint entombed within had a particular penchant for saving pilgrims. The city of Benevento produced a treatise in c1100 that attempted to divert pilgrims to its own shrines and away from the popular one of St Nicholas at Bari by slandering the latter city's hospitality towards foreign visitors; it claimed that Bari was a "merciless land, without water, wine and bread".

But many south Italian shrines did not need to produce such 'travel brochures' because they were already renowned across Europe. Those dedicated to St Nicholas at Bari, St Matthew at Salerno, St Benedict at Monte Cassino and St Michael at Monte Gargano received a vast influx of visitors and provided vital spiritual release points as the pilgrim travelled to wherever his final destination may be.

Roads to salvation

Unsurprisingly, the Norman rulers of southern Italy were eager to portray themselves as protectors of pilgrims, and issued legislation to back this up. However, the need for protection also revealed the dangers of travel. The threat of robbery, shipwreck and disease was omnipresent. In the 1120s, the north Italian St William of Montevergine aborted his pilgrimage to Jerusalem after he had been mugged in Apulia; no wonder pilgrims often travelled in groups.

Many pilgrims suffered from debilitating conditions and struggled to cope with the demands of medieval travel. Many died passing through southern Italy. One chronicler of the First Crusade saw the drowning of 400 pilgrims in Brindisi harbour. At least dying as a pilgrim brought the hope of salvation – the medieval equivalent of travel insurance.



A 14th-century tin alloy pilgrim's badge depicting the Madonna with child

"The threat of robbery, shipwreck and disease was omnipresent"

Southern Italy also served not merely as a logistical bridge to salvation but as a metaphorical one, too. These potentially fatal outcomes were indeed part of the experience and attraction of travel that many pilgrims embraced. Redemption required suffering and this could certainly be found in the demanding setting of southern Italy and Sicily. In modern terms the region provided a superb outdoor adventure experience for the thrill-seeker, a sinister landscape steeped in supernatural, classical and folkloric traditions that were channelled back to western Europe as travel increased in the central Middle Ages.

Southern Italy's landscape was characterised by features that elicited wonder and fear. Its surrounding seas could be treacherous, especially the busy Strait of Messina, full of whirlpools and tidal rips. The Muslim traveller Ibn Jubayr described the waters as boiling like a cauldron; he suffered a near-fatal shipwreck in this strait in the 1180s.

Unsurprisingly, it was here that classical legend located the two sea monsters named Charybdis and Scylla, a vortex and a giant

Saint Castrense saving sailors from a storm in a 12th-century mosaic at the Cathedral of Monreale, Sicily



ART ARCHIVE/AKG IMAGES



Dante and Virgil,
the Dragon and
the Sea Monster
from *The Divine
Comedy* by
Dante Alighieri

multi-headed sea-dog, respectively. Commentators such as the Englishman Gervase of Tilbury attempted to de-bunk these legends in the 12th century (he believed the whirlpools were created by the release of winds trapped below the seabed) but in doing so showed that many believed them to be real and/or were avidly interested in such tales. Indeed, the famous Hereford Mappa Mundi, dating to the late 13th century, offers a particularly vivid portrayal of the two sea monsters lurking in Sicilian waters.

Explosive material

Southern Italy was also a hotspot for seismic activity – as it is today. Several eruptions were observed in the Middle Ages at Vesuvius and Etna, while earthquakes were a regular feature: one that struck Sicily in 1169 was said to have killed 15,000 people at Catania. While some medieval commentators tried to analyse these events in a natural, scientific framework, many still viewed them as portentous signs, often indicating God's disapproval.

The region's volcanoes were endowed with even greater potency through a set of myths connecting them to the entrance to hell. Increased medieval interest in Virgil, the ancient poet and author of the *Aeneid*, led to renewed associations between the region of Vesuvius and the gateway to the Underworld, for it was there that Virgil's hero, Aeneas, appears to have located it. Gervase of Tilbury noted the "spine-chilling cries of lamenting souls" heard in the vicinity of Vesuvius, apparently being purged in the Underworld.

Medieval commentators also spoke metaphorically of the "infernal torments" and "cauldrons" of Sicily. In the 12th century the diplomat Peter of Blois said that the island's mountains "are the gates of death and hell, where men are swallowed by the earth and the living sink into hell". A strange and beguiling world materialised in 12th-century southern Italy – one that seemed to exist halfway between heaven and hell, and which must

have challenged the medieval visitor's psychological landscape.

The reviving 12th-century interest in the classical past also contributed to the aura of curiosity, danger and attraction that southern Italy exerted on visitors. Alongside those long-recounted tales of Scylla and Charybdis we find the revival of legends about Virgil and his supernatural protection of Naples, where he was allegedly buried.

Gervase of Tilbury recorded some of these in detail: Virgil's protection of the city from snakes, an Englishman who found Virgil's bones in the 1190s with a book of magic, and the city gate where Virgil bestowed good fortune on those passing through the correct side.

In c1170 a Spanish Jewish traveller, Benjamin of Tudela, passed Pozzuoli near Naples and marvelled at the sight of an ancient city submerged just off the coast where "one can still see the markets and towers which stood in the midst of the city." Benjamin also noted Pozzuoli's famous hot spring baths which "all the afflicted of Lombardy visit... in the summertime" to benefit from the restorative properties of its waters. Indeed, many travellers also came to the region to access and benefit from cutting-edge medical knowledge, the fusion of Arabic and ancient Greek learning, available at the great medical school of Salerno.

Another 12th-century English author, Roger of Howden, also included within one of his chronicles a literary tourist guide highlighting sites in southern Italy associated with Pontius Pilate and Virgil. The great 13th-century preacher Jacques de Vitry railed against people travelling to witness the bizarre, and it is clear that many of the accounts we have mentioned were tailored for an inquisitive audience, a segment of which was more than likely to visit southern Italy.

It would seem, therefore, that medieval travellers displayed traits reflecting aspects of our modern understanding of tourist travel,

and particularly the trend for travel that produced transformative and morally meaningful experiences. Of course, to avoid obvious anachronism, the parallels between medieval and modern must remain loose, and account for the multiple differences that developed in the intervening centuries.

Nevertheless, medieval people travelled regularly, and sometimes long distances, encountering lands that were unfamiliar and challenging. But these challenges and new experiences were actually often sought as ends in themselves. Southern Italy encapsulated these trends – and offered an experience for travellers in all their guises. It had developed travel and service infrastructures. It catered for those seeking spiritual detox, for those who were interested in the distant past and in intellectual nourishment, and for those who sought physical and psychological tests – its volcanoes, earthquakes, volatile seas and entrances to the Underworld made the region akin to a modern-day theme park.

For the medieval traveller, salvation, life enrichment and damnation all sat together in southern Italy – helping to create an alluring travel hotspot. **H**

Dr Paul Oldfield is a lecturer in medieval history at the University of Manchester

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

- **Sanctity and Pilgrimage in Medieval Southern Italy, 1000–1200** by Paul Oldfield (Cambridge University Press, 2014)
- **The Age of Pilgrimage: The Medieval Journey to God** by Jonathan Sumption (Hidden Spring, 2003)
- **The Medieval Traveller** by Norbert Ohler, translated by Caroline Hiller (Boydell Press, 2010)

ON THE PODCAST

- Paul Oldfield discusses the medieval travelling experience on our podcast historyextra.com/medieval-life

Queens of industry

In the 150 years after the Black Death halved London's population, women enjoyed new economic power in the city. **Caroline Barron** asks whether this era truly was a 'golden age' for English women

In April 1349, as the Black Death swept through London, Mathilda de Myms drew up her will. Her husband, John, had died the previous month, leaving his tenements to his wife and entrusting to her the guardianship of their daughter, Isabella. But the plague continued to ravage the capital, and Mathilda – wisely, as it transpired – decided to get her affairs in order. Shortly afterwards she was herself struck down and died.

John and Mathilda had run a business making religious images and paintings. Mathilda's will arranged for her apprentice, William, to continue his training with a monk in Bermondsey Priory, and bequeathed to him the tools he needed, together with one of her best chests in which to keep them. A brewery owned by Mathilda was to be sold to pay for prayers for her and John.

That will underlines the devastating impact of the Black Death on thousands of families across the country. But the document also offers other insights – specifically, into opportunities that resulted from the soaring death toll.

In this instance, Mathilda clearly had wealth of her own, and the freedom to write such a will. She was, briefly, an early beneficiary of a period of relative economic power for women created by the sudden dearth of skilled and trained men – an era that has been dubbed a 'golden age'.



“When the Black Death struck, it sent London's population plummeting down to 40,000 from a peak of 80,000 in 1300”

The mortuary crosses above were placed on the body of a plague victim in London c1348. It was in the capital that the Black Death had the greatest impact on women's lives

Even before the plague afflicted London, the capital's customary law offered women freedoms that they rarely enjoyed elsewhere in England, except perhaps in York. For example, a woman might enter into obligations on her own behalf, take on apprentices, run her own business, rent property, and sue (or be sued) for debt in the London courts. A woman – especially if she was a widow – could even write a will, as Mathilda de Myms did.

But after the plague struck, sending London's population plummeting to 40,000 from a peak of 80,000 in 1300, these opportunities multiplied. In fact, the mayor and aldermen, alarmed by a chronic shortage of manpower, began actively to encourage women to exercise their new economic rights.

Eventually, the rights went further: from 1465, a widow of a citizen of London, who was living there with him at the time of his death, would be made 'free of the city' (a citizen) as long as she continued to live in London and did not remarry.

City authorities were especially anxious to encourage the widows of London merchants and craftsmen to continue to run their husbands' workshops or trading enterprises, to ensure that these businesses continued to contribute to civic prosperity and taxation. Thus it became compulsory for widows to train their late husbands' apprentices, or to make proper provision for them.

In the years following the Black Death, girl apprentices became prominent in

surviving records. Though this wasn't a new phenomenon – as early as 1276, Marion de Lymeseye was apprenticed to Roger Oriel, a paternosterer (maker of rosaries) – but in the half-century after the Black Death, from 1350 to 1400, numbers of female apprentices soared.

Fathers sometimes specified in their wills that their daughters should be apprenticed to learn a trade. Robert de Ramseye, a fishmonger who died in 1373, left 20 shillings to his daughter, Elizabeth – for her marriage, and for “putting her to a trade”.

Records are sparse – only 30 apprenticeship indentures from medieval London survive – but about a third of them relate to girls, many training in the craft of silkwork or embroidery. Their indentures, like those of boys, had to be recorded in the apprentice rolls kept at the Guildhall, and the terms of the indentures were the same, usually for seven years.

Why the rise in female apprentices at this time? For boys, a completed apprenticeship opened the way to the citizenship of London, with all its attendant political and economic advantages and responsibilities. For girls, though, this was not the case – citizenship did not follow an apprenticeship, and most went on to marry.

A female apprentice lived in the household of her master or mistress (not always the case with servants), and was placed almost completely under their authority. The master or mistress had specific obligations to feed, clothe and nurture the apprentice and, above all, to train her in the secrets and skills of her craft. An apprenticeship provided girls with patrons and business contacts, and secured their status within the working community.

So parents from gentry families outside London knew that apprenticing daughters would provide them with the means to earn a living, and to run an independent household should that prove necessary. Unsurprisingly, then, most girls were bound by their father or brother, though one woman from Sussex bound herself as an apprentice to another woman in London.

Sole traders

Married women in London could choose to trade separately from their husbands as *femmes soles*. At the time when her husband, Thomas, was serving as an alderman, around 1380, Maud Ireland traded as a *femme sole* silkwoman. “According to the usage of the city [she was] bound to answer her own contracts,” and she was sued for a debt owed for white silk bought from an Italian merchant.

Women were expected to make a public declaration of their sole status. In October 1457, Agnes Gower stated to the mayor and aldermen that she practised the art of a

A French manuscript from c1327–35 depicts a woman forging nails. Though such opportunities did exist in London before the Black Death, they increased significantly afterwards



Golden girls

These four women exploited the opportunities presented when the plague struck



Agnes Ramsey Mason

Agnes, who never used her husband's name, was the daughter of the famous architect and mason William Ramsey, who was killed by the Black Death in 1349. Though married to another mason, Robert Hubard, Agnes continued to run her father's business, entering into a contract with the dowager Queen Isabella, widow of Edward II, to build her fine tomb at the enormous cost of £100.



Alice Holford Bailiff

Alice took over the post of bailiff of London Bridge on the death of her husband, Nicholas, in 1433, and continued in office for over 20 years. The bailiff collected the tolls due from boats passing through the bridge, and from carts that crossed it into London. The task was a complicated one – charges varied according to the goods and the person transporting them – and Alice must have had some literacy skills.



Johanna Hill Bell-founder

On the death of her husband in 1440, Johanna took full charge of their bell-founding business till her own death in 1441. Seven of her bells still exist as far away as Ipswich, Sussex and Devon. Johanna continued to use her husband's mark – a cross and circle within a shield – but surmounted with a lozenge to indicate that the workshop was now under her authority.



Ellen Langwith Silkwoman

Ellen, who died in 1481, was a London silkwoman. When her first husband, cutler Philip Waltham, died she was left to train their three female apprentices. She later married a tailor, John Langwith, but continued with her own craft. She was recorded as buying gold thread and raw silk direct from Venetian merchants, and in 1465 supplied saddle decorations and silk banners for the coronation of Elizabeth Woodville, wife of Edward IV. She was courted by both the Cutlers' and Taylors' companies.

silkwoman and no other, and asked to be allowed to "merchandise" without her husband John, and to answer sole for her own contracts according to city custom. This was granted and recorded.

Some of these independent London women were doing business on a large scale. Agnes Ramsey, daughter of the noted architect and mason William Ramsey, ran her father's business after his death in 1349 (see sidebar, left). Mathilda Penne ran her husband's business as a skinner for 12 years after his death; she trained her own apprentices and employed male servants and, possibly, a female scrivener to keep the accounts.

Twice during the 15th century, the substantial bell foundry outside Aldgate was run by widows. The household and workshop of the bell-founder Johanna Hill, who died in 1441, comprised four male apprentices, two female servants, 10 male servants, a specialised bell-maker, a clerk and the daughter of a fellow bell-founder.

Other widows continued to run the financial side of their husbands' businesses, if not the trading or craft aspects; they pursued debtors, sorted out accounts and saw to the execution of their husbands' wills. These women were active in maintaining their households, bolstering the welfare of their souls and managing the upbringing of their children, as well as other endeavours. Another Agnes, the widow of Stephen Forster (mayor of London 1454–55), saw to the rebuilding and reorganisation of the prison at Ludgate.

Crafty women

These were remarkable women who made their mark in the commercial world of London and won respect within their social milieus. The records of the craft guilds and companies acknowledge the presence of women, but their role was not a formal one – rather, they shared in the religious, charitable and social aspects of company life.

However, several crafts and trades recognised the contribution of women workers. In the early 15th century, for example, one-third of all brewers paying dues to the Brewers' Company were women. Some of these were single, while others were widows or married women trading sole; one Agnes, whose husband Stephen was a draper, paid her dues independently throughout the 1420s.

Though women were seemingly marginalised within these organisations, limited to social and charitable roles, they were able to make contacts with other workers within their craft. They could also achieve recognition of their credit-worthiness and could share in, and contribute to, the material resources of their societies. To offset the imposed limitations of their role within guilds and companies, and

to supplement the formal craft relationships, many created important informal networks of friends, servants, apprentices, dependants and patrons.

However enmeshed women may have been in the social and economic networks of London life, their professional advancement was still constrained. For example, there is scant evidence of a woman holding any public office in which she might have been placed in authority over a man – such appointments would be vigorously resisted.

In 1422, the men of Queenhythe ward complained that John of Ely, the local

Female weavers are depicted in a late-medieval illustration. Women were involved in a wide range of crafts in London at this time





A female sculptor at work is illustrated in a late 15th-century painting

“Rarely, women were delegated authority:

Alice Holford was bailiff of London Bridge for more than 20 years”

measurer of oysters, had subcontracted his office to women “who know not how to do it; nor is it worship to this city that women should have such things in governance”. No doubt most Londoners shared the view of the men of Queenhythe; certainly, women never served as ward officers, common councilmen or, of course, aldermen. The delegation of authority to women was extremely rare, but it did happen: for more than 20 years following the death of her husband, Nicholas, in 1433, Alice Holford held the office of bailiff of London Bridge (see sidebar).

Future gains

The century and a half between 1350 and 1500 could reasonably be considered a ‘golden age’ for women in London – but it was short-lived. As the population swelled once more, an acute manpower shortage was replaced by a glut, and women were pushed out of the labour market. In 1570, the Drapers’ Company refused to allow a member to take on a girl apprentice “for that they had not seen the like before”.

Women continued to work after that period, of course, but in largely informal and dependent positions. London merchants were transforming themselves into country gentlemen, and it was no longer suitable for their wives to be seen trading sole. Moreover, Protestantism created a specific role for women – as godly domestic teachers within the household.

Throughout the 15th century, English society remained deeply patriarchal. The opportunities that had been available to women had been purely economic: they had no handles on power and no way of influencing political decisions. So the ‘golden age’ was golden only briefly, and was most apparent in the economic capital, London.

Nonetheless, when given the chance, these women demonstrated their ability to do men’s work. In doing so they set an important precedent, to be followed by women in the two world wars of the last century, which led directly to the greater economic and political emancipation of women today. **H**

Caroline Barron is professor emerita at Royal Holloway, University of London, and a specialist in late medieval British history, particularly the history of women

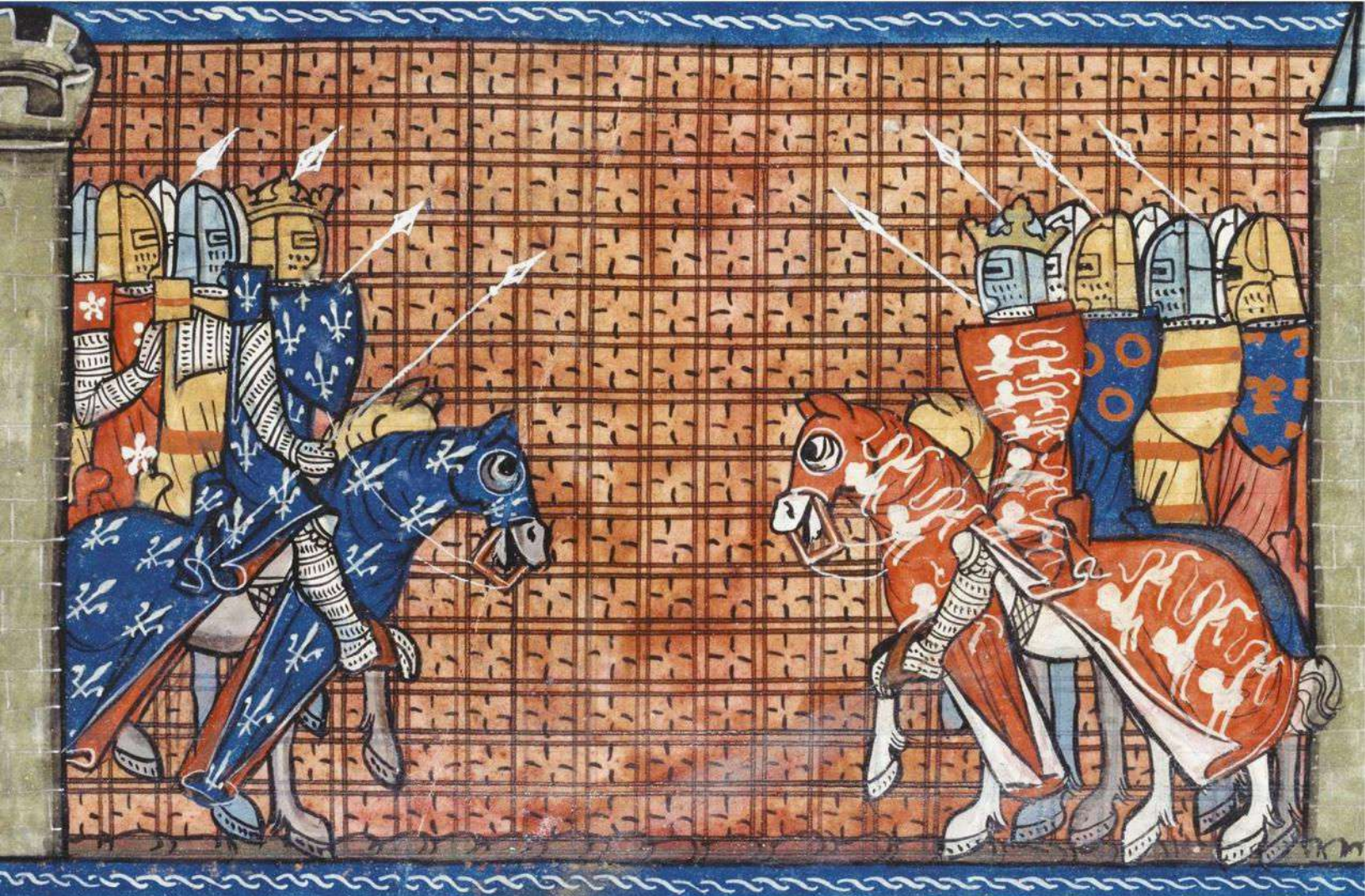
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LISTEN AGAIN

► Melvyn Bragg and guests – including Caroline Barron – discuss one of the most extraordinary events of the 14th century, **The Peasants’ Revolt**, on **In Our Time** at bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0038x8s

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ABOVE: English forces under King John clash with the French. Defeat at Bouvines in 1214 to Philip II of France so weakened John that he was soon forced to submit to his barons' demands to seal Magna Carta. BELOW: A scene from the Queen Mary Psalter (c1310–20) shows peasants reaping corn. The Great Charter did little to improve the lot of the 1.5 million unfree residents of 13th-century England



What did Magna Carta mean to the English in 1215?

It famously went on to inspire everyone from Cromwell to Gandhi - but what impact did King John's Great Charter have on his subjects in the year in which it was sealed?

David Carpenter investigates



A peasant cuts hay with a scythe in a 13th-century illumination. Magna Carta discriminated against huge swathes of the population, argues David Carpenter

1215

will surely always be defined by Magna Carta. When, on 15 June of that fateful year, King John reluctantly agreed to seal a great charter in the meadow of Runnymede beside the river Thames, he put his name to a document that has perhaps done more than any other to champion the cause of the rule of law over absolute power. That fact alone makes 1215 a hugely significant year in English history.

That the events of 1215 have resonated down the centuries is beyond doubt. As countless history books have proclaimed, the charter inspired everyone from the opponents of Charles I, through the founding fathers of America, to those struggling for freedom in the 20th century, among them Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela.

But what those history books, for the most part, have not revealed is what this famous document meant to the people of England in 1215. What was its impact on those who worked the land, went to church, administered justice and ran local government as the country emerged into the 13th century? Who did Magna Carta benefit – and short-change – the most?

Barons call the shots

It's often assumed that the summer of 1215 found the people of England more or less united behind the barons in their opposition to the king. There is undoubtedly some truth in this, yet the England of 1215 was still a very divided, unequal society – one dominated by 100 or so earls and barons. And there's no getting away from this fact when you read Magna Carta. This was an aggressive document that did not merely reflect social divisions but actively sought to reinforce them. It thus discriminated against unfree peasants and women, and gave less to towns and knights than they might have hoped.

The chief beneficiaries of many chapters of the charter were those who held their land directly from the king, his so-called 'tenants-in-chief' – a body several hundred-strong dominated by the earls and greater barons. The national assembly set up by the charter to give the kingdom's consent to taxation was thus made up exclusively of tenants-in-chief, with the earls, greater barons (and bishops and abbots) receiving a personal summons to attend, and the rest of the tenants-in-chief being summoned generally through the sheriffs.

That meant that there was no place in the

assembly for representatives of London and other towns, although there is evidence that Londoners thought there should have been. This was not the only way in which Magna Carta discriminated against the capital: when the city joined the barons' revolt against John, it was promised that tallage – an arbitrary tax levied by the king on towns – would only be raised with the kingdom's consent. During the negotiations at Runnymede, this demand was dropped.

In overlooking London, the barons were acting in their own interests – for if the king lost the right to tallage his towns as he pleased, the barons might find their ability to tallage their towns compromised too.

While England's leading earls and barons were undoubtedly the chief beneficiaries of Magna Carta, the implications for the country's 4,500 knights were far more mixed.

The knights were an influential constituency in early 13th-century England. Most

held their land from earls, barons, bishops and abbots – though a few hundred were tenants-in-chief.

For all their powers, the knights would have found some of the early baronial demands in 1215 disappointing. In the one known as the 'Unknown Charter', the king's concessions were made largely to his tenants-in-chief (so excluding the majority of knights). There was nothing at all about the running of local government, a major knightly concern.

Knights fight for their rights

Yet, as knights joined the rebellion, they were able to transform the baronial programme. Magna Carta was to stipulate that four knights, elected in the county court, were to sit with the king's judges when the latter visited the counties to hear the common law legal actions. That charter also stated that 12 knights, elected in each county (so not chosen by the barons), would investigate the abuses of the king's local officials. This chapter in the charter, greatly strengthened during the negotiations at Runnymede, placed tremendous power in the knights' hands.

The knights were able to draw another significant concession from the barons. Under the terms of Magna Carta, the king could no longer allow a baron to levy a tax on his men, save on three occasions: to knight his eldest son, ransom his body or marry his eldest daughter. This met a major knightly grievance, because John had often allowed taxes to be levied for other purposes, notably to help a baron pay his debts to the crown.

Yet this victory was short-lived. The chapter preventing barons levying taxes on their free men was left out of all the versions of Magna Carta after 1215, so never appeared in the definitive charter of 1225. What's more, the body of knights and freemen in the counties was unrepresented in the national assembly that the 1215 Magna Carta said should be summoned to agree to taxation because, as we have seen, this body was to be composed simply of bishops, abbots, earls, barons and other tenants-in-chief.

There was no suggestion that knights elected by their counties should attend, despite the fact that the charter had locally elected knights sitting with the king's judges and investigating local abuses. In this respect, King John was actually *more* progressive than the barons. In 1213, he summoned to a meeting four knights from each county to discuss the kingdom's affairs – an example not followed by the barons in the national assembly they envisaged in Magna Carta.

In the event, knights representing the counties weren't summoned to a parliament (as national assemblies were increasingly called) until 1254. And it was only in 1265 –

“England in 1215 was a divided, unequal society, and there's no getting away from this fact when you read Magna Carta”



Pressure at the top
King John of England sits on his throne in an illustration from the 1250s. He presided over a kingdom dominated by 100 or so hugely powerful earls and barons

“When it came to discriminating against the **unfree peasants on whose labours their wealth depended**, the barons and knights were ruthlessly united”

in the great parliament convoked by Simon de Montfort – that knights from the counties and burgesses from the towns were summoned together: the beginnings of the House of Commons.

Dividing the spoils

If the barons and knights were divided over the question of who should enjoy the spoils of Magna Carta, when it came to discriminating against the unfree peasants on whose labours their wealth depended, they were ruthlessly united.

Perhaps half of England’s population of around 3 million in 1215 were unfree. These villeins or serfs had very little share in John’s concessions in Magna Carta. The most famous chapter in the charter – 39 – laid down that “no free man” was to be deprived of property save by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land. In other words, lords could dispossess their unfree peasants as they wished.

Chapter 40 appeared more promising. “To no one will we deny, delay or sell right or justice,” John proclaimed. The trouble is, it was the law itself that denied villeins access to the king’s courts in any matter concerning their lands and services. As *Bracton*, the 13th-century book on English law, put it, when a villein woke up in the morning, he did not know what he would have to do by nightfall. He must do as he was bid by his lord. The solitary chapter in Magna Carta that apparently safeguarded villeins was less effective than it seems on first reading. It was carefully drafted to protect villeins from fines imposed by the king, but not from fines imposed by their lords!

The situation for free women was slightly less bleak. Magna Carta stipulated that widows were to enter their dowers and inheritances without charge and difficulty, and also protected widows from compulsory re-marriage.

And though chapter 39 of the charter safeguarded the “free man” from arbitrary



A charter for the ages
The 1225 version of Magna Carta, issued by King John's son, Henry III. Parts of this document remain on the United Kingdom's statute book to this day

Magna Carta: a story of survival

When, on 15 June 1215, King John sealed Magna Carta, he did so because he found himself on the wrong end of a **massive rebellion against his rule** – sparked by his harsh treatment of his subjects and military defeat in Normandy – led by some of England's most powerful barons.

Magna Carta's 63 chapters and 3,550 words (all written in Latin) **placed a series of restrictions upon the king**, limiting his ability to take money in arbitrary fashion, and insisting he no longer sell, deny and delay justice.

Yet the charter was also designed as a **peace treaty** between John and his opponents. **In that respect it was a failure.** Within little more than a month of Runnymede, John was asking the pope to quash it. The result was civil war.

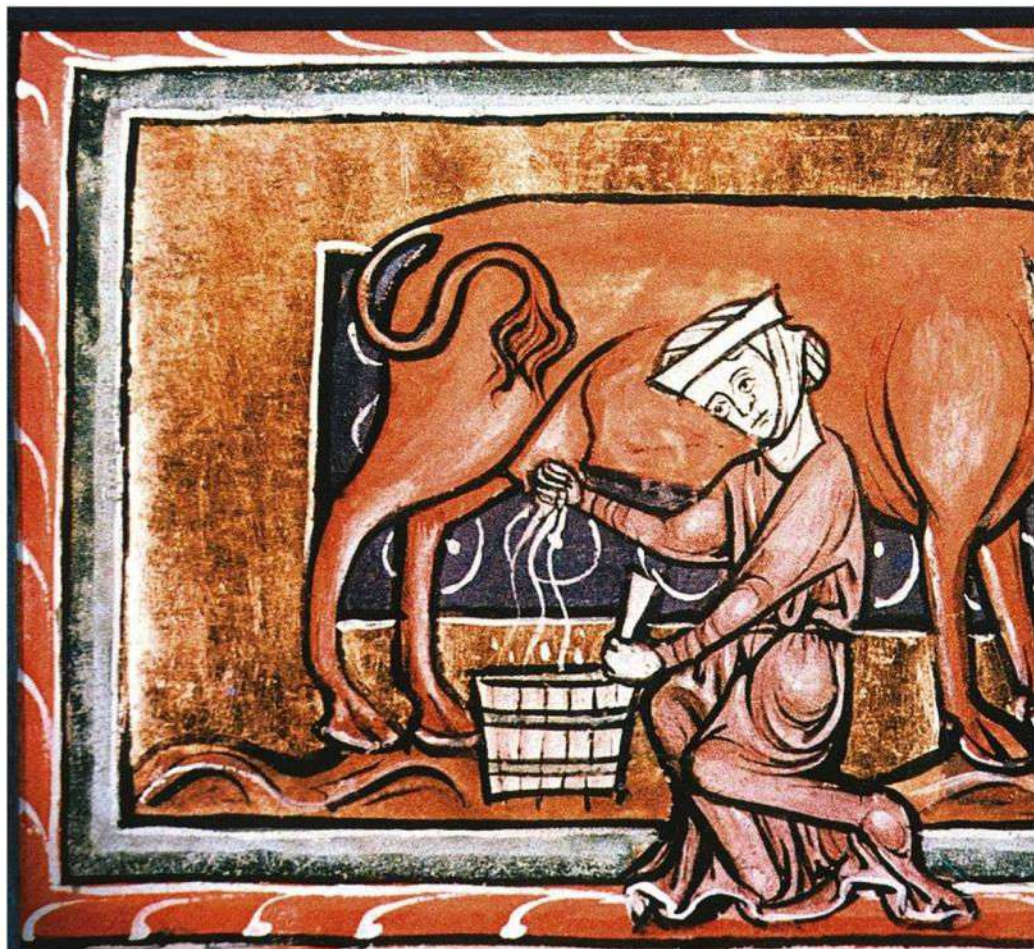
Magna Carta could have been lost to history then. It survived because, after John's death in October 1216, the minority government of his son, the nine-year-old Henry III, **accepted what John had rejected** and issued a new version of the charter in the hope of tempting rebels back into the king's camp. Having won the war, and in order to consolidate the peace, Henry issued a second version in 1217. Then, in 1225, in return for a great tax, he issued what became the final and definitive version.

It was this, the 1225 charter of Henry III (in its essentials, the same as the charter of 1215), that was to be confirmed by later kings. Chapters of the 1225 charter **remain on the statute book of the United Kingdom today.**

Over time, many of the charter's details became outmoded but Magna Carta survived because it asserted a fundamental principle – that of the rule of law. The king could no longer seize property and arrest individuals as he pleased. He could do so only **by lawful process.**



Henry III issued the definitive version of Magna Carta in 1225



arrest, imprisonment, dispossession and “destruction”, “man” in 1215 would have been widely understood as meaning human being. This chapter, therefore, embraced women as well as men. Coming so soon after John's ‘destruction’ of Matilda de Briouze and her eldest son (they were starved to death in Corfe Castle after their family fell out with the king), the significance of these words would not have been lost on many people.

Second-class women

Magna Carta, however, also reflected the inequalities between the sexes. A woman enjoyed far fewer property rights than her male counterparts: she only inherited in default of a brother, and, in marriage, her property was controlled by her husband.

The charter also highlighted the way in which women were sidelined in public life. It gave the names of 39 men: John himself, his lay and ecclesiastical counsellors, and the foreign sheriffs and castellans who were to be dismissed from office. How many women were named in the document? Not one.

Though women were entitled to the judgment of their peers, those peers would have been entirely male – for women did not sit on juries, and they did not (save for on very rare occasions) hold public office.

Worse still, the only chapter in Magna Carta where the word ‘femina’ did appear put

“Magna Carta highlighted the way in which women were sidelined in public life. **Not one woman was named in the charter's 63 chapters**”

women on a lower level than men. This stated that no one was to be arrested for murder on a woman's accusation, unless the deceased happened to be her husband.

Legal records suggest that women were lodging a high number of appeals at the time of Magna Carta. As they could not be made to back up their accusation in a trial by battle, the suspicion was that women were making accusations irresponsibly – either on their own account or because they were being manipulated by men. Whatever the truth of that view, the chapter does not suggest that the men behind Magna Carta had a particularly high opinion of the opposite sex.



A raw deal A female peasant milks a cow in a 13th-century illustration. Though Magna Carta protected free women from arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, dispossession and “destruction”, it reflected their limited role in public affairs

For the people of England in 1215, therefore, Magna Carta proved a socially divided and divisive document. It buttressed, rather than challenged inequalities, ensuring that power remained very much in the hands of a tiny clique at the top. Yet, for all that, Magna Carta met real grievances and asserted one fundamental principle: that of the rule of law. It was a tenet from which *everyone* could potentially benefit. And that was crucial. **H**

David Carpenter is professor of medieval history at King's College London. He is a co-investigator on the Magna Carta Project, which provides text, translations and expert commentaries: magnacartaresearch.org

DISCOVER MORE

BOOK

► **Magna Carta** by David Carpenter (Penguin Classics, 2015)

EXHIBITION

► See two 1215 copies of the Great Charter at **Magna Carta: Law, Liberty, Legacy**, at the British Library, London, till 1 September bl.uk/events/magna-carta--law-liberty-legacy

LOCATIONS

► Explore key sites linked with the Great Charter <http://magnacarta800th.com/tourist-information/magna-carta-locations/>

“I hope that 100 years from now Magna Carta will still be at the forefront of popular acclaim

David Carpenter tells Rob Attar why Magna Carta retains its relevance in 2015

Why is Magna Carta still so important after 800 years?

My answer here is totally unoriginal! It is because it asserts a fundamental principle that the ruler is subject to the law and can't treat his subjects in an arbitrary fashion. That's summed up in the most famous chapter: no 39, which is still on the statute book of the United Kingdom today. There's also chapter 40, which says that nobody will be denied their rights or justice. That, too, is still part of the laws of this country.

Magna Carta is also important because of its history. It has become an iconic document, used by the opponents of Charles I and then the founding fathers of the United States, among others, as a general principle of lawful rule. And it is still part of the political debate in Britain today.

Did the authors of the charter have any idea of how iconic a document it would become?

At the time they certainly hoped it would have a very long-term future. After all, it was granted by King John in perpetuity for himself and his heirs, and the aspiration was that it would become a fundamental document governing the constitution of England. However, within a few months of Magna Carta being issued, both sides had abandoned it – to the extent that it looked like a dead letter by the autumn of 1215.

You've just written a new book on Magna Carta. What have been the main findings of your research for that project?

There were three discoveries that excited me the most. The first was a letter written by King John in 1209 that showed that he was trying to reassert overlordship over Scotland at this time. It means that the Magna Carta revolt saved Scotland from English domination, so the whole history of Anglo-Scottish relations may now need to be rethought.

The second discovery was that one of the four copies of Magna Carta went to Canterbury Cathedral, which we never knew before. And my third exciting finding was the sheer number of copies of the charter that were produced, many of which are variant texts. These throw new light on the negotiations at Runnymede, and were themselves very important in spreading news of Magna Carta.

Just as importantly, my research has enabled me to open a window onto English society in 1215, focusing on women and peasants as well as earls, barons and knights.

What are the main popular misconceptions about Magna Carta nowadays?

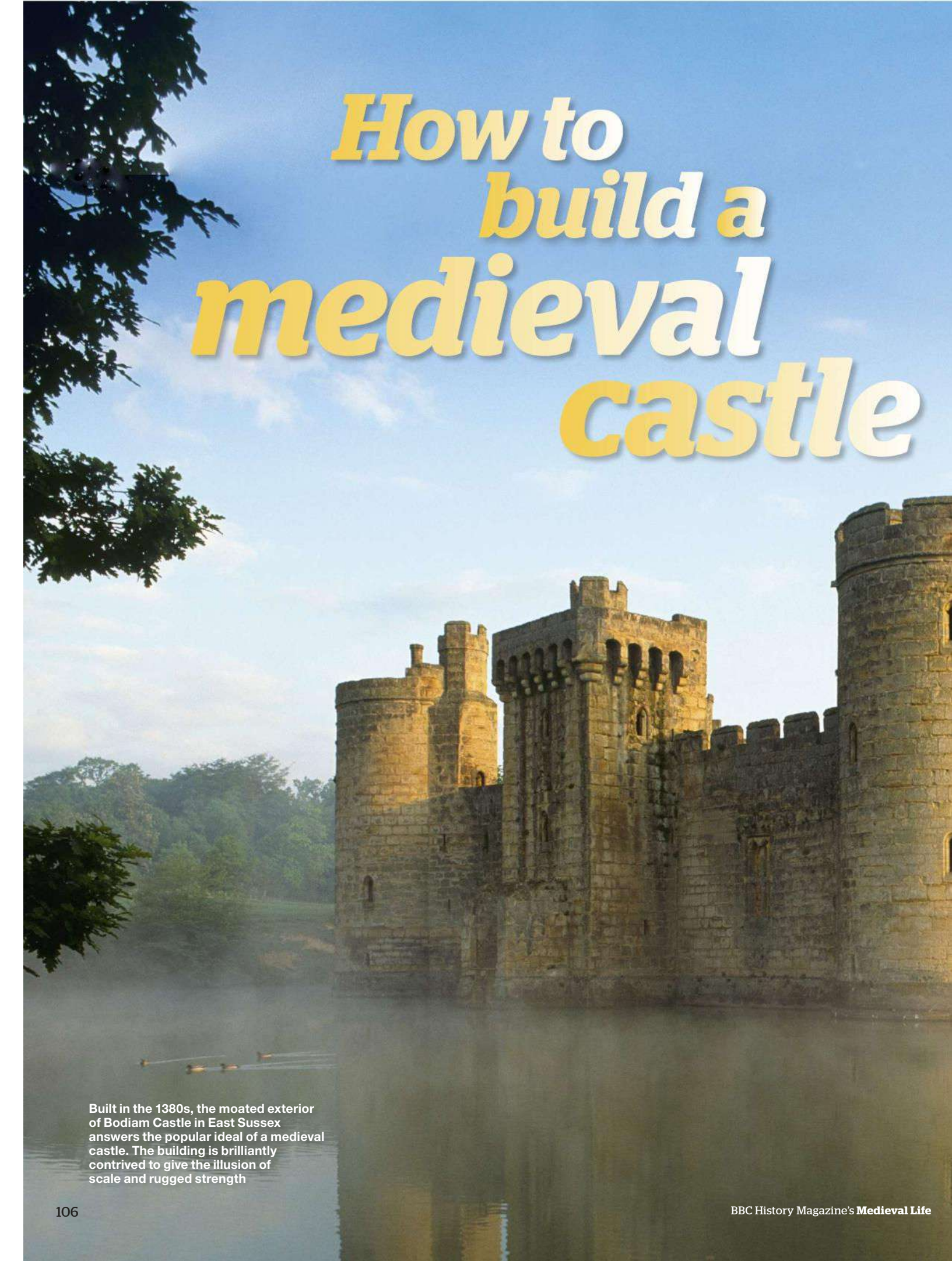
The thing people often get wrong is thinking it was signed, rather than sealed. It is amazing how common that mistake is. Actually, though, it's salutary to realise how many people know nothing at all about the charter. I remember last year giving a talk about new Magna Carta discoveries to a group of prospective history undergraduates. I began by saying how there had been many exciting new discoveries in the run-up to the 800th anniversary, and someone in the front row held up her hand and said: “Yes, but please could you tell me: what is Magna Carta?” So you can't take anything for granted. You have to remember how few people study medieval history. I wonder how many people would even know the date of Magna Carta.

What do you think the 800th anniversary will mean for Magna Carta?

In the short term, I suppose that everyone hopes that the anniversary will boost interest in the charter – both the historic document and the themes and principles that it embodies. We hope that it will come to the forefront of public awareness.

One thing I do think about is that in a way we are (in 2015) between the past and the future. It's not so difficult for people like me to reach back to the 700th anniversary, which was marked during the First World War. I knew people who fought in that war, and I also feel in touch with some of the historians who wrote in the *Magna Carta Commemoration Essays* (published during the Great War), particularly Maurice Powicke. There are people still alive today who knew Powicke well.

As well as reaching back, I often think about the 2115 anniversary, when none of us will be alive. We don't know whether the charter will still be celebrated then, or what kind of academic work will be going on, but it's fascinating to speculate. Of course, I hope that, 100 years from now, Magna Carta will still be at the forefront of both academic and popular interest and acclaim.



How to build a medieval castle

Built in the 1380s, the moated exterior of Bodiam Castle in East Sussex answers the popular ideal of a medieval castle. The building is brilliantly contrived to give the illusion of scale and rugged strength

The Norman conquest triggered a boom in castle building, but the process of creating a fortress from scratch was far from simple, as **John Goodall** finds out



1 Choose your site carefully

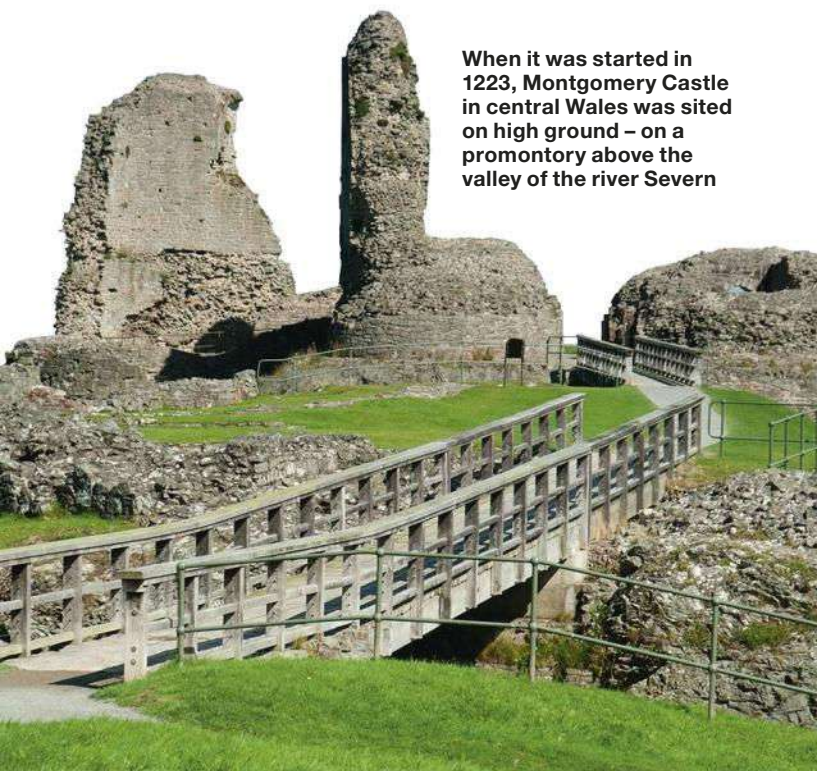
It is crucial that you build your castle at a prominent site in a position of strategic importance

Castles were commonly erected on naturally prominent sites, usually commanding a landscape or a communication link, such as a ford, bridge or pass.

It is rare to have a medieval account of the circumstances behind the choice of a castle site but they do exist. On 30 September 1223, the 15-year-old king Henry III arrived in Montgomery with an army. The king, having campaigned successfully against the Welsh prince Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, was intent on creating a new castle in the area to secure the border of his realm. Carpenters in England had been charged with preparing timber for the new fortifications a month previously, but the king's advisers determined where the castle should be sited.

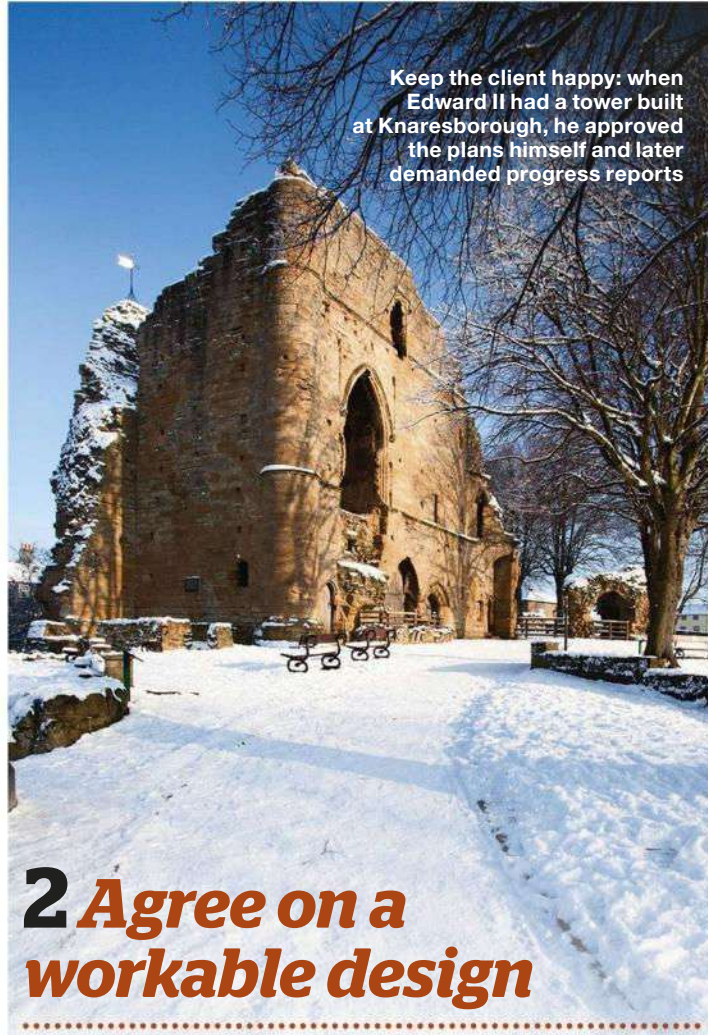
After surveying the area carefully they chose a spot on the very edge of a promontory above the valley of the river Severn. It was, in the words of the chronicler Roger of Wendover, a position "that seemed untakeable to everyone". He also observed that the castle was "for the security of the region on account of the frequent attacks of the Welsh".

When it was started in 1223, Montgomery Castle in central Wales was sited on high ground – on a promontory above the valley of the river Severn



Top tip:

Identify the places where the topography dominates transport routes: these are natural sites for castles. Bear in mind that the castle's design will be shaped by the building's position. A castle on a high outcrop will, for example, have dry moats.



Keep the client happy: when Edward II had a tower built at Knaresborough, he approved the plans himself and later demanded progress reports

2 Agree on a workable design

A master mason who can draw plans is a must – while an engineer who knows all about weapons is useful, too

Experienced soldiers may have had ideas of their own about the design of their castle, in terms of the form of the buildings and their arrangement. But it's unlikely they would have had any specialist knowledge in design or building.

What was needed to realise a vision was a master mason – an experienced builder whose distinguishing skill was the ability to draw. With an understanding of practical geometry he used the simple tools of a measuring rod, set-square and compass to create architectural designs. Master masons would present a drawn proposal for the castle for approval and, when building commenced, would oversee its construction.

When Edward II began building a great residential tower at Knaresborough Castle in Yorkshire for his favourite, Piers Gaveston, in 1307 he not only approved the design – presumably expressed as a drawing – created by the London master mason Hugh of Titchmarsh, but also demanded from him regular reports on the progress of the work. From the mid-16th century, a new group of professionals, termed engineers, increasingly came to dominate the design and construction of fortifications. They had a technical understanding of the use and power of cannon, both in protecting and reducing castle defences.



Top tip:

Plan arrow slits carefully for a wide field of fire. Shape according to the weapons you use: longbow men need large splays (the oblique angles in the side of an opening in a wall), crossbow men less so.

ALAMY

3 Source a large and skilled workforce

You'll need thousands of men – not necessarily all there by choice

The labour required to build a great castle was vast. We have no documentary evidence for the numbers involved in the first great round of castle-building in England, after 1066, but the scale of many castles of this period makes it clear why some chronicles speak of the English population as being oppressed by the castle construction campaign of their Norman conquerors. In the later Middle Ages, however, surviving building accounts offer detailed information.

During his first invasion of Wales, in 1277, Edward I began building a castle at Flint, north-east Wales. This was erected at speed, using the massive resources of the crown. In August that year, within a month of starting work, 2,300 men were employed on site. These included 1,270 diggers, 320 woodmen, 330 carpenters, 200 masons, 12 smiths and 10 charcoal burners. All of these men were pressed into service from

across the realm and accompanied into Wales with guards to prevent desertion.

In every period, foreign specialists were employed where necessary, often in senior roles. The millions of bricks needed to remodel Tattershall Castle, Lincolnshire during the 1440s were supplied by a certain Baldwin the 'Docheman' or Dutchman, evidently an immigrant.



Top tip:

Depending on the size of your workforce and the distance it has travelled, it may be necessary to provide accommodation on site.



Edward I employed 200 masons, like those shown above, to work on his castle at Flint in Wales



The building site of Rhuddlan Castle was protected by an outer wall. This formed a large enclosure that extended to the canalised river Clwyd

4 Secure the building site

A work-in-progress under construction in hostile territory is extremely vulnerable to attack

In order to build a castle in hostile territory it was essential to protect the site from attack. One way of doing this was to enclose the construction area within a timber fortification or low stone wall. Such medieval defences have sometimes been preserved in the completed building as an outer apron wall, as can be seen at Beaumaris, Anglesey, begun in 1295.

No less important was the need to secure communications with the outside world for the delivery of building materials and supplies. In 1277, for example, Edward I – at vast expense – canalised the river Clwyd from the sea to his new castle at Rhuddlan. Here, the apron wall built to protect the building site extended down to the quay on the river banks.

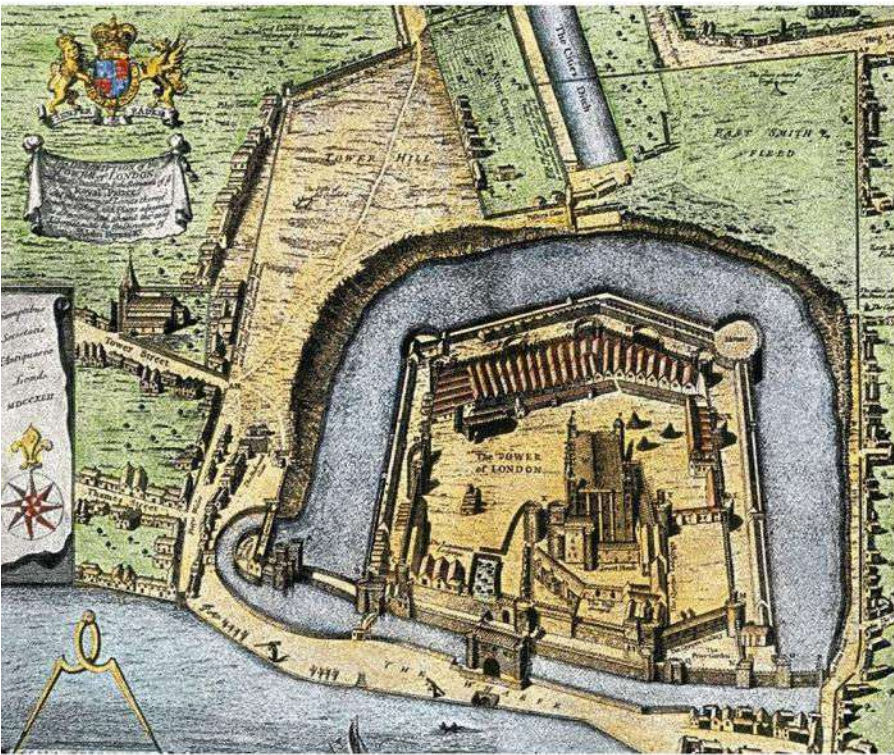
There might also have been concerns for security during major alterations to an existing castle. When Henry II remodelled Dover Castle, Kent in the 1180s, his building operation appears to have been carefully staggered so that the fortifications were continuously defensible throughout the construction process.

According to surviving royal accounts, work to the inner bailey wall was begun only when the great tower or keep was sufficiently complete to be garrisoned.



Top tip:

Castle-building materials are big and bulky. If at all possible, try to move them by water, even if you have to build a dock or canal to do so.



This 18th-century engraving of a 1597 plan of the Tower of London shows how huge volumes of earth had to be shifted to build moats or rampsarts

5 Landscape the area

Building a castle might involve moving a massive amount of earth, at great cost

It is often forgotten that castle fortifications were as much works of landscaping as of architecture. The resources involved in moving earth without pieces of machinery were necessarily enormous. Even after long neglect, the scale of Norman earthworks, in particular, can be extraordinary. It has been estimated, for example, that the vast artificial mound, termed a motte, erected around 1100 at Pleshey Castle, Essex, required 24,000 days of labour to raise.

Some aspects of landscaping were also highly skilled, notably the creation of moats filled with water. When Edward I remodelled the Tower of London in the 1270s, he employed a foreign specialist, Walter of Flanders, to create a huge new tidal moat around the site. The ditching work that Walter supervised cost more than £4,000 to complete – an enormous sum that comprised nearly a quarter of the cost of the entire project.

As the use of cannon improved in siege warfare, earth became yet more important as a means of absorbing the impact of cannonballs. Curiously, the ability to move vast quantities of earth allowed some fortification engineers to find work creating gardens.



Top tip:

Don't be cheated by your master mason. Make him design his building in such a way that it can be accurately costed.



Top tip:

Save on labour, expense and time by digging the masonry of your castle walls from the ditches around the castle site.

6 Lay the foundations

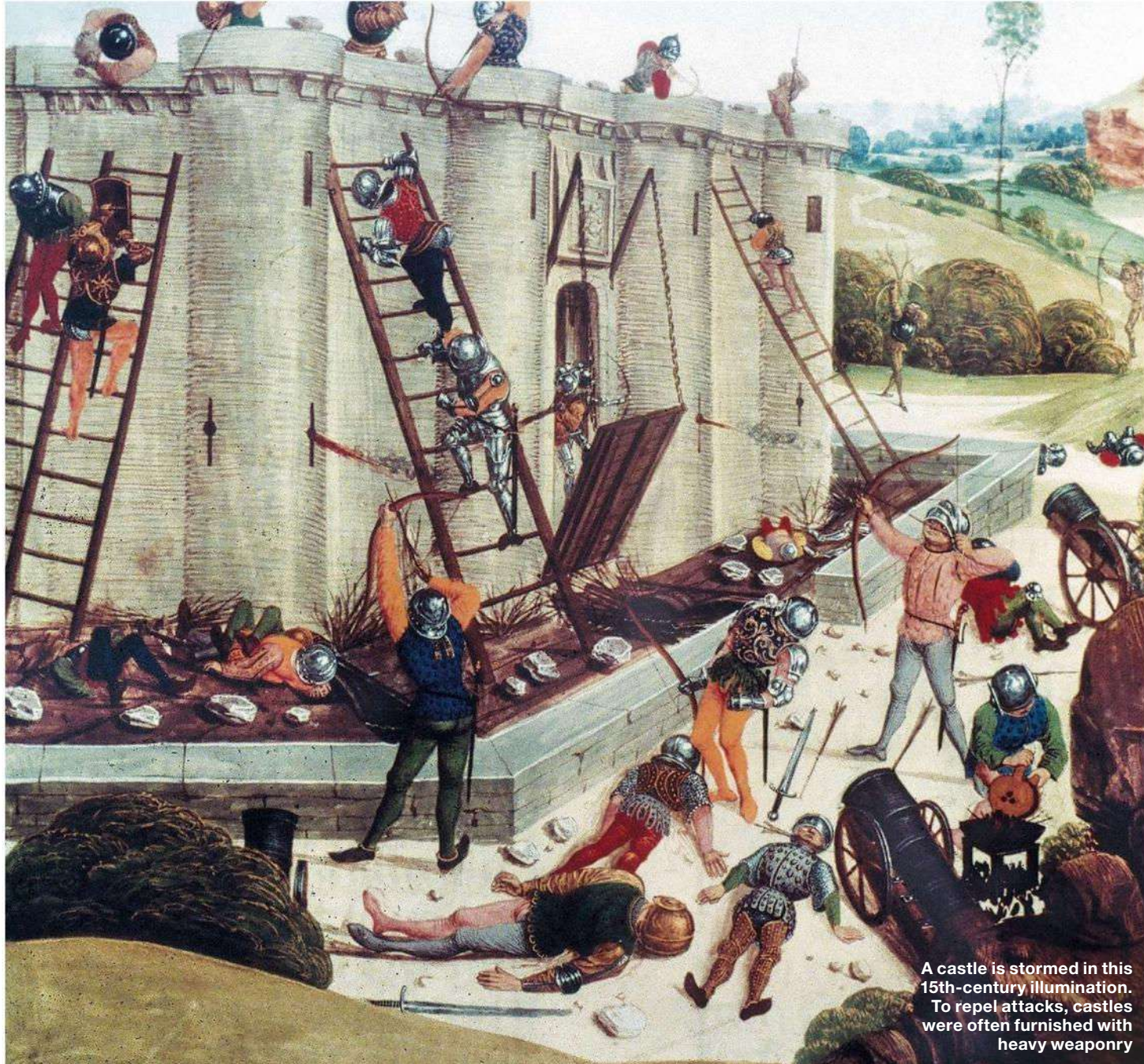
Transfer the mason's plan carefully to the ground

Using measured lengths of rope and pegs, it was possible to set out the foundations of a building in full scale on the ground. This was done by walking out the actions of a master mason's drawing tools, his compass and set-square, to realise the plan. With foundation trenches dug, work began on the masonry structure. To save money, responsibility for construction was often deputed to a senior, rather than master, mason. The measurement of masonry usually used in the Middle Ages was the rod (16ft 6in, or 5m). At Warkworth, Northumberland, for example, the complex great tower is laid out on a grid of rods, probably for purposes of costing.

Medieval building processes are often well documented. In 1441–42, a tower at Tutbury Castle, Staffordshire was demolished and the plan for its successor laid out with ropes and pegs. The overseer, the Earl of Stafford, was for some reason dissatisfied. The king's master mason, Robert of Westerley, was sent to Tutbury where he consulted with two senior masons to design a new tower on a different site. Westerley then left and over the next eight years a small group of workmen, including four junior masons, realised their new tower.

Senior masons could also be brought in to attest to the quality of work, as occurred at Cooling Castle, Kent, where the royal mason Henry Yevele surveyed work undertaken from 1381–84. He criticised departures from the original design and rounded down the bill.





A castle is stormed in this 15th-century illumination. To repel attacks, castles were often furnished with heavy weaponry

The great tower of Warkworth Castle, Northumberland was laid out on a grid of rods – a measurement equal to 16ft 6in



Top tip:

Oak timber hardens with age after felling and is most easily worked when it is green. Pollarded trees (those with the upper branches removed) supply long, clean limbs that can be easily transported and worked into shape with least labour.

7 Fortify your castle

Finish with sophisticated defences and high-spec carpentry

Until the 12th century, the fortifications of most castles comprised earth and timber. Though stone buildings predominated thereafter, wood remained a very important material in medieval warfare and fortification.

Stone castles were commonly prepared for hostilities by the addition of fighting galleries (termed 'brattices' or 'alures') along walls, as well as shutters that could be hung between battlements to provide protection for the defenders. All of these fittings were made of wood. So, too, were the heavy weapons that were used to defend castles, including catapults and heavy crossbows termed 'springalds'. This artillery was generally designed by a highly paid professional carpenter, sometimes termed an engineer or 'ingeniator'.

Such expertise didn't come cheap, but it could be worth its weight in gold. This was certainly the case in 1266, when Kenilworth Castle in Warwickshire resisted Henry III for nearly six months, its catapults and water defences frustrating every attack.

There are even rare records of campaign castles being made entirely from wood; these could be transported and re-erected where needed. One such structure was built for a French invasion of England in 1386 but was captured on a ship by the Calais garrison. The castle was described as comprising a dense wall of timber 20ft high and 3,000 paces long. At every interval of 12 paces there rose up a 30ft tower capable of holding 10 soldiers, and there was some form of unspecified protection for gunners.

8 Deal with water and sewage

Don't forget the mod cons. You'll appreciate them if the castle is ever besieged

It was essential that castles were provided with an effective water supply. This could take the form of one or more wells dug to serve particular buildings such as the kitchen or stable. It can be hard to appreciate the sheer scale of medieval well shafts without descending them. That at Beeston Castle, Cheshire has a shaft 100 metres deep and lined with cut stone for the first 60 metres.

Evidence can occasionally be found for the sophisticated use of water in domestic apartments. The great tower at Dover Castle possesses a system of lead pipes delivering water throughout the interior. It was fed from a well using a winch system and possibly from rainwater, too.

The effective disposal of human waste was another problem confronting castle designers. Latrines were grouped together within buildings so that the shafts descending from them could empty out of a common outlet. They were also set down short corridors to contain smells and were often furnished with fixed wooden seats and detachable lids.

Castle latrines are often today popularly termed 'garderobes'. In fact, the vocabulary for describing latrines in the Middle Ages was both colourful and broad. It included the words gong or gang (from the Anglo-Saxon meaning 'the place to go'), privy and jake (a French form of 'john' or 'johnny').



The place to go: a gong, gang, privy or jake at Chipchase Castle

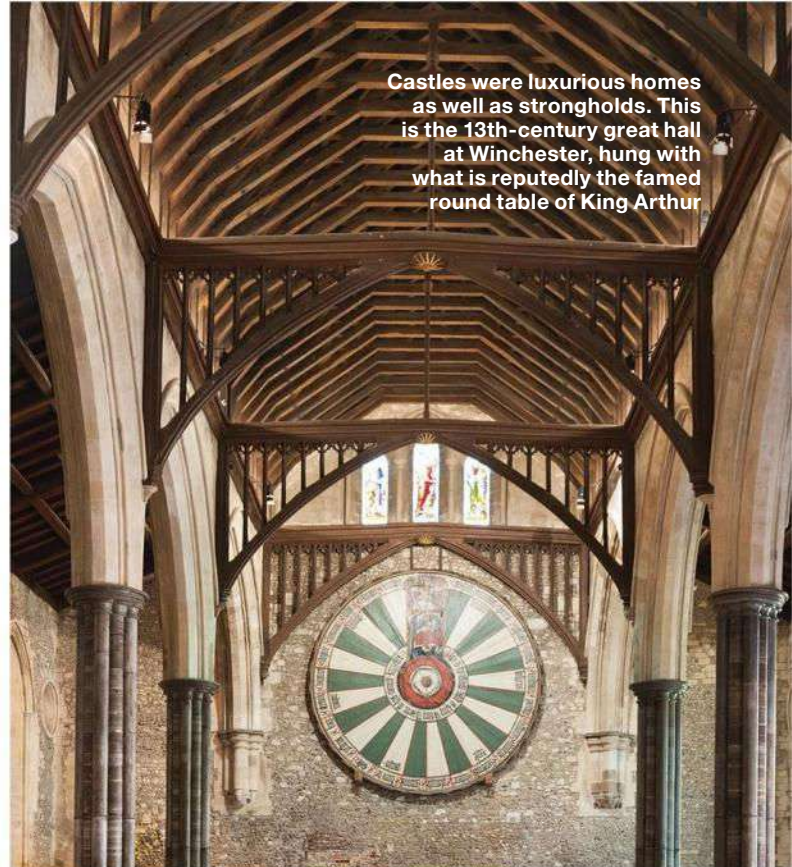


Top tip: Ask your master mason to plan comfortable and private en-suite facilities off the principal bed chamber, following the example of Henry II at Dover Castle.



Top tip: Make sure the castle interior is splendid enough to attract visitors and friends. Entertainment can win battles without the danger of fighting.

Castles were luxurious homes as well as strongholds. This is the 13th-century great hall at Winchester, hung with what is reputedly the famed round table of King Arthur



9 Decorate as required

A castle doesn't just have to be well defended. High-status residents demand a certain swankiness, too

Castles needed to be defensible in times of war, but they also served as luxurious homes: the medieval nobility expected their accommodation to be both comfortable and well appointed. Throughout the Middle Ages these individuals travelled continuously with their attendant households, taking possessions and furniture with them from residence to residence. Important domestic interiors, however, commonly possessed permanent decorative fixtures such as stained glass.

The decorative tastes of Henry III are recorded in particular and beguiling detail. In 1235–36, for example, he directed that his hall in Winchester Castle, Hampshire be painted with a map of the world and a 'wheel of fortune'. This decoration has since been lost but the majestic interior does preserve the reputed round table of King Arthur – probably created between 1250 and 1280.

The wider setting of castles was also important for grand living. Parks were laid out for the jealously guarded aristocratic privilege of hunting, and there was a demand for gardens, too.

The surviving building accounts for Kirby Muxloe Castle, Leicestershire reveal that its patron, Lord Hastings, began laying out the gardens at the very start of the building operations in 1480.

In the Middle Ages there was also a taste for rooms with fine views, as well as for fine decorations. During the 13th century, a group of rooms built in castles including Leeds in Kent and Chepstow, Monmouthshire, became known as a 'gloriette', a reflection of their splendour. The gloriette at Corfe Castle in Dorset, now ruined, is believed to have been an elegant domestic palace built for King John within the castle defences. **H**

John Goodall is an award-winning author, and architectural editor of the weekly magazine *Country Life*

DISCOVER MORE

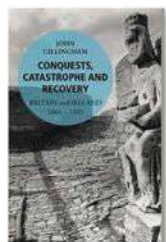
BOOKS

- **The English Castle** by John Goodall (Yale, 2011)
- **Castle: A History of the Buildings that Shaped Medieval Britain** by Marc Morris (Windmill Books, 2012)

Reading about medieval life

MARC MORRIS introduces some of the best books about the Middle Ages

General introductions to the medieval period are many and varied in quality, but you'll struggle to find a better single-volume survey than **John Gillingham's *Conquests, Catastrophe and Recovery: Britain and Ireland 1066–1485*** (Vintage, 2014).



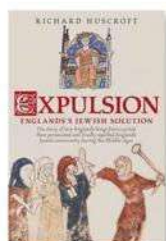
The conquests of the title are the Norman invasion of England and the subsequent English invasions of Ireland and Wales; the catastrophe is the Black Death. These are, of course, familiar events, but one of the joys of Gillingham's book is that almost every page contains something fresh and thought-provoking, with sections on technology, trade and education, as well as changing attitudes towards slavery and warfare.

Medievalists have waited a long time for a new scholarly account of the Great Charter of 1215, but **David Carpenter's new *Magna Carta*** (Penguin, 2015) was



worth the wait. Published to mark the 800th anniversary of the crucial document, it is modestly billed by its author and publishers as a commentary but in fact includes a comprehensive overview of the causes of contention between King John and his barons. As such it offers succinct introductions to many aspects of society in the 12th and 13th centuries, including the lives of women, peasants, townspeople and churchmen, as well as earls and knights.

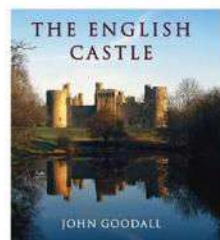
Carpenter also discusses the lives of England's medieval Jews but for a fuller examination of this fascinating subject,



the best primer is **Expulsion: England's Jewish Solution** by **Richard Huscroft** (The History Press, 2006). The title refers to Edward I's banishment of the Jews from his kingdom in 1290, but the author covers the whole saga of this people in England, from their arrival soon after the

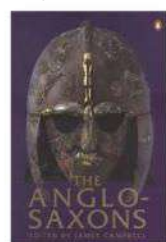
Norman conquest to their enforced exile two centuries later. Clear and concise, it explains how the Jews were protected by successive kings but at the cost of increasing exploitation.

Life for the Jews in medieval England became increasingly intolerable. For others, however, it was a time of increasing prosperity and luxury. The superb buildings constructed by the richest people in medieval society provide the subject of **John Goodall's *The English Castle***



(Yale University Press, 2011). Engagingly written and gloriously illustrated with hundreds of photographs and diagrams, it is a book that demonstrates definitively that most castles had very little to do with fighting but were more about status and the conspicuous display of wealth.

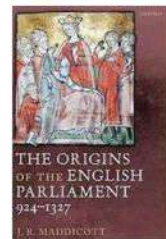
Some people still find it wounding to learn that the castle was a French invention, imported to England at the time of the Norman conquest. Such people should find solace in the portrait of life in pre-conquest England painted in **The Anglo-Saxons**,



edited by **James Campbell** (Penguin, 1991). Another richly illustrated volume, it successfully blends history and archaeology, with stand-alone sections on the foundation of towns, architecture, coins, books and metalworking. It becomes immediately obvious why England was such an irresistible target for Viking and Norman invaders.

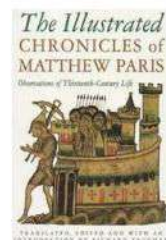
Though much of the material culture of Anglo-Saxon England was lost as a result of these invasions, many of its ideas lived on. Despite the fuss being made this year about the 750th anniversary of parliament, invented – so it is claimed – by Simon de Montfort in 1265, the foundations of democratic representation stretch much further back. **JR Maddicott**, who 20 years ago wrote the definitive biography of

Montfort, traces these roots in his magisterial survey **The Origins of the English Parliament, 924–1327**

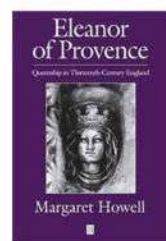


(Oxford University Press, 2010). The subject is complicated but Maddicott's treatment is never less than clear and compelling.

Some of the earliest descriptions of parliament were provided by **Matthew Paris**, a garrulous monk of St Albans who flourished in the first half of the 13th century. Paris provides a wonderful detailed, lively and occasionally dyspeptic account of the world around him. Highlights include his descriptions of the town of Winchelsea being engulfed by the sea, the bellicose Archbishop Boniface beating up his sub-prior, and a Norfolk knight who was castrated by a lynch mob. The author was also a gifted artist, and many of his enchanting drawings are included in **The Illustrated Chronicles of Matthew Paris: Observations of Thirteenth-Century Life** (Sutton Publishing, 1994), which offers a four-year slice of this wonderful panorama.



Paris mentions the discovery in 1249 of a man on the Isle of Wight who was only 3ft tall, and who was adopted by Eleanor of Provence, queen of Henry III. Eleanor had married Henry 13 years earlier, when he was 28; she was only 12 years old but had grown to be a political power in her own right, in many respects more determined and resolute than the king himself.



Her story, and the wider story of queenship in 13th-century England, is splendidly related in **Margaret Howell's *Eleanor of Provence*** (Wiley, 2001). **H**

Marc Morris is a historian specialising in the Middle Ages. His latest book is *King John: Treachery, Tyranny and the Road to Magna Carta* (Cornerstone, 2015)

“Medieval people did things like lick the dust off saints’ tombs to cure malaria. That’s pretty superstitious!”

“Outside academia, it is commonly supposed that medieval people were hairy, smelly, superstitious and violent. Let me start this piece by telling you, on the basis of 25 years studying a small part of the medieval world, that this view is exactly right.

Obviously, I am overstating things. Every element of the image can be challenged. Taking a bath was probably more common than we might think and according to one writer, the Vikings – of all people – had a reputation for seducing the ladies with their fancy habits of bathing and combing their hair.

The caricature nevertheless contains more truth than falsehood. The Middle Ages were no golden age of personal hygiene. Emperor Charlemagne (d814) bathed with dozens of his mates; I can only imagine the colour of the water after that. Hair, and how you wore it, signified all kinds of social status: free or slave, married or single, mourning, age, ethnic identity, and so on. Something commonly noted about the ‘barbarians’ who became the focus for the new kingdoms of the early Middle Ages was their distinctive hairstyles. The

Merovingian kings (reigning in what’s now France between c475 and 751) wore their hair very long. Contemporaries called them *reges criniti* – ‘long-haired kings’.

A scandal evidently arose with the reappearance of fashionable long hair among late 11th-century Norman courtiers, rejecting their fathers’ manlier short-hair which, it was said, had manifested the moral superiority that won the battle of Hastings.

Medieval people did things like lick the dust off saints’ tombs to cure malaria. That’s pretty

superstitious! People believed in demons and witches, and thought malaria was caused by swamp dragons’ poisonous breath just

as readily as we believe in the perils of theft and fire, or that you’ll catch a cold if you don’t wrap up warm.

By the High Middle Ages, apparently no fewer than

seven foreskins of Christ were being venerated (after all, after the ascension, the holy prepuce was his only fleshly remainder).

In *Pulp Fiction*, Samuel L Jackson famously threatens to “get medieval on yo’ ass”, and violence was very important in structuring medieval society. By the seventh century, at least, legal cases could be settled by trial by combat. Frequently blood vengeance was held to be entirely legal – as long as you followed the rules. Kings were expected to wage war and they frequently did. The army was, after all, the political assembly.

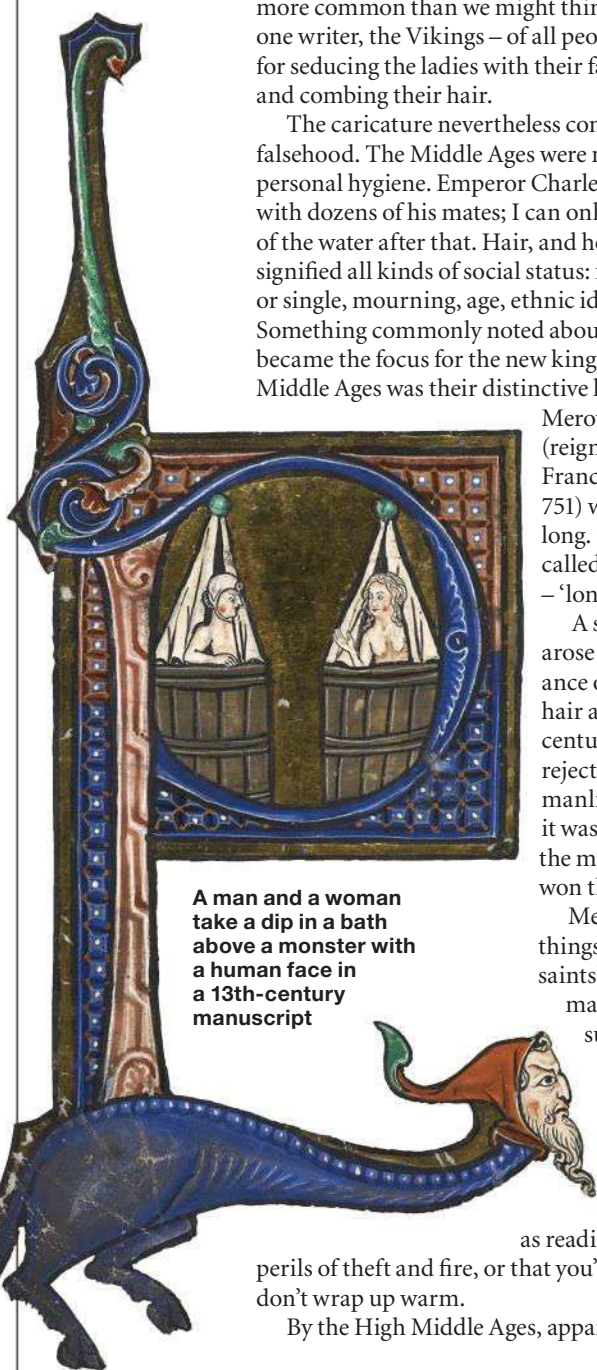
So: hairy, superstitious, ignorant and violent – medieval people were all of those things. Am I belittling the era? No. Of course, vastly important things happened during the ill-defined medieval millennium, some of which shape our world: Islam appeared and became a world religion; Christianity permeated and dominated western Europe; the Roman empire was refounded by Charlemagne in 800 (eventually called the Holy Roman Empire).

For a millennium Charlemagne was a touchstone of European monarchical government. The giants of 20th-century history are unlikely to match his legacy. But, even leaving all that (and more) aside, what interests me is *why* early medieval people went to war so much, often seemingly without any major strategic objective – sometimes, apparently, without intending really to do much damage at all? *Why* did people think it would help them to gather the dust from tombs for use as relics? *Why* was ethnicity symbolised by strange-looking arrangements of long hair or beards?

You can’t study medieval society without realising pretty quickly that there is something profoundly different about it, even when people stop being called Wamba, Erwig, Liutprand and Æthelfrith and start being called William, Richard or Geoffrey. That is not merely fascinating, but also important. Fascination – even outright amusement – is a way in, but history matters more than that. It teaches us to understand other world views, to see that *our* way of dividing up the world is not the only one.

As historians we are obliged to listen to their stories – critically, of course, but also carefully, patiently – to see the inhabitants of the medieval world as people: not people just like us, but people just the same. Recognising that shared humanity is one of history’s greatest tasks and studying the Middle Ages is a fascinating way of setting about it. **H**

Guy Halsall is professor of history at the University of York, and has written extensively on the Middle Ages. He blogs as Historian on the Edge: <http://600transformer.blogspot.co.uk/>



A man and a woman take a dip in a bath above a monster with a human face in a 13th-century manuscript

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Medieval life

THE STORIES OF ORDINARY PEOPLE IN THE MIDDLE AGES



“It was widely thought that women
shouldn’t wear pants in the
medieval period, yet they still did”

Historian Beatrix Nutz explores underwear
in the Middle Ages

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